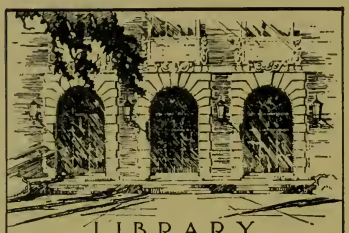

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THE EMU'S HEAD

THE EMU'S HEAD

A Chronicle of Dead Man's Flat

BY

W. CARLTON DAWE

AUTHOR OF

"MOUNT DESOLATION" "THE GOLDEN LAKE" ETC

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

LONDON

WARD & DOWNEY

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To Dear Hilda

With Uncle's best love.

London
Jan. 10th 1894

TO

MY FRIEND,

JOHN STEWART, Esq.,

OF

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA,

THIS BOOK IS INSCRIBED IN TOKEN

OF

THE MEMORY OF OLD DAYS.

Gen Pro Pay 5 Feb 55 Edwards 2v L J Smith 15 Mar 55

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THE EMU'S HEAD.

A Chronicle of Dead Man's Flat.

PROLOGUE.

I.

It was a wild night in mid-July. The wind howled through the great streets with indescribable fury, driving the drenching rain with unexampled force into the faces of all belated wanderers. The gas-lamps flared dismally in the cheerless scene; no passing cab nor vehicle of any description enlivened the monotony of the patter-patter of the great drops, or the hoarse screamings of the wind; all windows were securely fastened, and blinds snugly drawn, so that if any light pervaded a chamber no ray of it could escape out into the awful night. Scarcely a human

being was to be seen. Even the midnight prowlers had sought protection from the cruel storm, owning the presence of a fiend more pitiless than themselves. The city of Melbourne was given up to darkness and the tempest.

As George Vincent, hurrying from the neighbourhood of the Carlton Gardens, entered Stephen Street, or, as it is now called, Exhibition Street, and beheld the long stretch of dim gas-lamps before, him he thought he had never gazed upon a more melancholy scene, and, with something like a feeling of awe, plunged into it. He felt like one of those heroes of fairy lore who make strange journeys into wild and fearful lands; for is there not something awe-inspiring in a silent, sleeping city? Like a brave knight, however, he charged the dreadful passage, and a determined struggle ensued between him and the angry elements. Great Boreas! how the night

roared, how the rain hissed as it pelted down upon him! Whew! Was ever such a night for gods or men? His umbrella was blown to pieces in a twinkling, and it seemed as though a hundred fiends were trying to drag the great-coat from his back. But, failing in their endeavours, they, being mischievous imps, blew it up round his legs, so that before he had gone many yards he was wet through to the knees. This not being in accordance with his idea of the fitness of things, he looked about him for a temporary shelter. Just here Little Lonsdale Street crosses Stephen Street and continues its narrow way westward, so that when he emerged upon the former thoroughfare he took half-a-dozen quick paces up it and thus gained a moment's respite from the drenching storm.

As he stood listening to the furious wind which went screaming by, and watching the great drops pelt down upon an adjacent

lamp, he was suddenly startled from his reverie by hearing a noise which certainly seemed more of the earth than heaven. Knowing, however, the reputation of the quarter thereabouts, he doubted not but that it was merely another drunken brawl —a thing which concerned him not; and so once more he began to contemplate his friend the lamp, wondering how long the great drops would take to beat in its quivering panes.

"Help—help!"

There was no mistaking the sound this time. It came down the dim thoroughfare on a great burst of wind, shrieking as it passed away into the night. In a moment the young man had quitted his shelter and was bounding up the street, towards the spot whence the voice had issued. About fifty yards up he struck a narrow lane on his right, a black, grim-looking passage in which a solitary lamp flared

dismally, thus accentuating the surrounding darkness. Here he stood still a moment, straining his eyes and ears.

"Help—police!"

There was no doubt of it now. In the feeble glare of the light, full thirty yards up the lane, he distinguished the outlines of several figures, and, guessing that murder was at work, he bounded forward with the cry of "Police!" Those dim figures were immediately seen to stand upright, then turn about, and, like the evil spirits that they were, disappear into the darkness.

George Vincent looked about him in amazement, and had he been living in any but this most enlightened age he would, undoubtedly, have believed himself the sport of some strange hallucination, for, as far as he could see, there was no trace of the beings whom he had most certainly seen. Then there was the cry, too. Surely no immortal had ever shrieked for the police:

one never couples the two. And yet he had distinctly heard that cry. He peered intently into the darkness, for like all such places the lane was badly lighted—it needs all our gas to keep good the respectable—but he could see nothing. There was an offensive odour about the place, however, which did not escape him, and this, coupled with the dangerous reputation of the locality, impressed him with the advisability of retiring while he possessed a sound skin. And this admirable thought he was about to put into execution when he heard a groan issue from the darkness to the left of him. In a few strides he had reached the spot, and, stooping low, discovered a man stretched out on his back. His first thought was to shout loudly for help, but fearing that he might bring an undesirable crowd about him, he took the man's hand in his and asked him what was the matter.

"Who are you?" asked the man, starting up with a piteous moan.

"A friend."

"They've murdered me," groaned the poor wretch in a weak, terrified tone. "Take me down the lane—anywhere—anywhere out of this! They'll be at me again in a minute."

Vincent, thinking this an excellent idea, prepared to lift the man in his arms, but the poor fellow's groans stopped any such charitable intentions.

"No, no," he sobbed, "no—I couldn't stand it. Drag me. Send for the police, quick. It was Flash Jim that did it, curse him. But," added the man with a ghastly sort of chuckle, "he didn't get it, he didn't get it."

This exertion brought on a severe fit of coughing, which almost precipitated him upon that journey from which no traveller returns; but after he had successfully

repulsed the attempt to hurry him into eternity, Vincent seized him beneath the arms and dragged him down the lane towards the street. He, however, had not accomplished more than half the distance before the injured one began to groan so loudly that the Good Samaritan was forced to stop through pity. Propping him up against the wall, the young man interrogated him once more as to his condition.

"I'm clean done for," gasped the man. "They've cooked me this time."

"Where are you hurt? Let me see what I can do for you."

"I am hurt all over. You can do nothing."

"Then let me run for help."

"No, no—for God's sake don't leave me—don't, or they'd be on me again and get it after all."

"Very well then. I will stand by you

till assistance arrives. The police are sure to be along presently."

"D— the police," said the dying man faintly.

"As you please," said George, smiling in spite of his surroundings. "Yet, if I mistake not, you called for them just now?"

"Yes, yes, of course—but that was only to frighten Jim; because I hate 'em as much as he does. If I hadn't done that he'd a-murdered me, the dog, and got it as safe as eggs."

"Got it," repeated the young man, his interest aroused in this indefinite statement, for "it" must have been of considerable importance to incite men to murder, "got what?"

"Look here, mate, you ain't a trap?"

"No."

"Nor a D?"

"No."

"You'll swear to it?"

"I will. I am merely a private citizen. I was on my way home, but, stepping up the street to escape the rain, I heard your cry—and here I am."

"You are too late, mate."

"Don't say that. You may not be as badly injured as you imagine. If I could only get you out of this——"

"No, no — don't leave me," exclaimed the man piteously. Don't, if you're a Christian. Jim's a devil, he is, and would be on me in a second; but the cur won't come with you here. Curse the rain," he went on, shaking his fist at the dark sky, "why don't it stop? As if it wasn't bad enough for a man to die, without getting wet to the skin. Look here, mate, I don't know who you are, but you seem straight enough, and if you'll stand by me I'll make your fortune. I couldn't make my own because I couldn't read the infernal thing, but it's there all the same; and old Ben,

before he set out on his last job, gave it to me; and Flash Jim knew I had it, but I swore I hadn't; and to-night, like a fool, I showed it—showed it, after keeping it dark all these years—and that's why they have done for me, curse them, curse them!"

Vincent listened to this strange talk, fully believing the man was wandering in his mind.

"I wish you would let me get some help," he said; "or else allow me to move you."

"No, no," replied the man, in a low, husky voice, so low, indeed, that the young fellow had to bend over him to catch the words, "I couldn't stand being moved. They've cut me somewhere about the neck, and I should choke if you touched me. But don't be in a hurry, mate. I shall be gone in a minute, and then you can kick me down the gutter if you like. Tell me, are you rich?"

"I am anything but that."

"That's good to begin with," whispered the dying man huskily. "It's a fortune, you see, and it'll be the making of a poor man. 'Take it, Billy,' said old Ben, 'and guard it well. If I go first it's yours, if you go it's mine.' That's what old Ben said to me, mate, and you see I've stuck to it ever since. Just put your hand in my breast pocket, will you?" The young man did as he was bidden and extracted a pocket-book therefrom, which he held before the eyes of the dying man. "Yes, yes, the fortune's there. But not a word to the traps, mind, not a word to the traps"

Vincent slipped the book into one of his own pockets, and just at that moment a couple of lanterns flashed in the entrance to the lane.

"Help!" shouted the young man.

"Who is it?" whispered the dying man, "the traps?"

"Yes."

"Not a word, mind, not a word."

"What's the matter here?" asked one of the policemen as the two rushed up.

"Murder."

"Murder, eh?" They turned their lanterns full on the figure which Vincent had propped against the wall, and he saw a man of about fifty years of age, respectably dressed, though the clothes were now disarranged and dirty, and sodden with rain. It was a well-cut face he saw, and one which might have been handsome before age and dissipation had set their marks on it; but it was livid and ghastly now, and as he watched he saw the haggard eyes look up into the light with a defiant glance. Then the jaw dropped: the man was dead.

One of the constables here ran off for a stretcher, and while he was gone Vincent told the other that which we have already narrated, though he forgot to mention aught concerning the dead man's pocket-book.

The constable then explained that it would be necessary for him to re-state his story in the presence of the inspector, and the young man, nothing loth, accompanied the two officers when they bore away the body.

In the presence of the inspector and the two policemen George Vincent repeated his narrative; told minutely how he stood watching the lamp, how he heard the cry, how he rushed up and saw the figures hurry off; but, strange to relate, he again forgot to mention the dead man's gift.

II.

Mr. George Vincent, whom we have already had the pleasure of introducing, though under anything but conventional circumstances, was the only son of Mr. Samuel Horatio Vincent, a gentleman who at one time owned a considerable reputation as an architect in the city of Melbourne; but like too many gentlemen who enjoy fair reputations, Mr. Vincent was inclined to presume, and for such presumption he was fated to pay dearly. As a cat may be killed with care—and we believe no one will attempt to dispute this statement—so may a man's reputation perish by indulgence. Being a person of illimitable ideas, which he ever strove to indulge to the top of their bent, Mr. Vincent soon found that the consequences

attached to such large notions were like the notions themselves—infinite. A fine house in South Yarra, in which he entertained royally, horses, carriages, servants, —all these needed money. It was the same old story. Mr. Vincent got the money and the Jews his property. It was rather a come-down for this estimable family, but luckily, before the final catastrophe, the two daughters married fairly well, so that there were only husband and wife, with the boy George, then a lad of seventeen, to provide for. From South Yarra these three migrated to the wilds of Prahran, and though Master George experienced much sorrow in leaving the grammar school for an office, he was yet old enough to know that there was no gainsaying necessity.

Mr. Vincent, however, instead of regarding his fall as the dire calamity his friends insisted upon making it, looked upon it as a positive godsend, one of those

blessings which come in the guise of curses, for it relieved him of innumerable embarrassments, and allowed him to dabble in matters more congenial to his tastes. As he had lost through speculation, while neglecting his own trade, to speculation he turned, resolved to win back fame and fortune or—or go bankrupt again if he could get the chance. Consequently he promoted banks, building societies, mining companies, irrigation schemes—in fact, there was no company of any importance in which Mr. Samuel Horatio Vincent had not his little finger. People quite believed that he was well on the way to fortune once more—for there is no way of making a fortune equal to that of handling other people's money—but before that belief was wholly realised, Mr. Samuel Horatio Vincent gave up the ghost. Indeed, when they came to reckon up his personalty, his sole fortune consisted of one hundred

and seventy-five pounds. Nevertheless, the good man had built up a considerable reputation, and if his premature demise did not quite paralyse the money market, it was known to affect several tradesmen in the neighbourhood of Prahran.

George was in his twenty-third year when his father died, and when we meet him, five years after, he was still in the same dingy office, slaving away for a stipend of three pounds a week, which, as far as he could see, was likely to remain at that figure for some time to come; for his master, Mr. Bash, was one of those good people who always think more of the spiritual than the material welfare of a man. Perhaps he might one day rise to three pounds ten; perhaps again he might recede. When man depends for subsistence on the caprices of his fellow man, he must live in constant terror of the worst. Whenever he approached Mr. Bash

on the subject of a rise, that good man seized the opportunity of delivering a homily on the follies of youth and the evil of luxurious living, and when the young man somewhat flippantly replied that he should like to have the chance of living luxuriously, Mr. Bash answered, with a look of horror, that it would profit him nothing if he gained the whole world, and lost his everlasting soul.

And so he went back to his desk, and wondered if he were doomed to pass the rest of his life in this deadly dull routine. Was he for ever to be shut in by four walls, taking stock and casting up accounts? Never! And he chewed his pen till his teeth ached. But the grim walls still surrounded him, and the ponderous ledgers grinned at him as they sat on their dingy shelves. "Ha, ha," they seemed to say, "you belong to us, you belong to us. You may fret and you may

fume, but escape us you never shall." Intolerable! Better be a counter-jumper at once. One may have to measure calico all one's life, truly, but it must be a pleasure to measure calico for some people. And when your customer is young and chatty, and she turns up those pretty eyes of hers and asks you how much a yard, do you not feel your fingers tremble so that you cut her off a good three inches too much? Believe me, my brothers, there is something extremely fascinating in the life of a counter-jumper. At least, so George Vincent thought. To him there was something fascinating in everything but clerkship, for such a business gives a man no chance. A counter-jumper may save up till he purchases a little shop of his own; then see how handy a wife comes in. But what use can the poor clerk make of his better half? Not that George contemplated matrimony — oh, dear no!

Though once he had crossed Brander's Ferry with a young girl whose beauty had impressed him not a little. He had thought much of her soft eyes and fair face, more, in fact, than he would admit even to himself; and when, some three weeks after, he met her on the public crossing, he thought she was an old friend and raised his hat, but she, blushing vividly, hurried on with averted face. That was the last George saw of his divinity, and though for a long time after, whenever he thought of matrimony, he used to conjure up those sweet eyes and that fair face, he had now almost forgotten the lady's existence.

Sometimes he used to think he would not mind grinding away at his desk if there were only something to hope for; but the eternal getting up and going to business, summer and winter, in rain or shine, with no hope of improvement or advancement,

nothing to which he might look forward in all the years that were to come—this, this was the thing which angered him beyond endurance. Could any life be worse than that of clerkship? Was it a fit occupation for a full-grown, able-bodied man; a man who had ambition and hopes, and whose hands used to itch for something weightier than a pen? He sighed for the vanished Ballarats and the warlike stockades. He would have welcomed any change, from gold-digging to fighting. And yet he could not see how he was to avoid that fatal pen, those grinning ledgers. He grew peevish, irritable, almost misanthropic; and it is certain he developed a turn for sarcasm and cynicism which was not becoming in one so young. He had no friends, that is no intimates, and though people liked him well enough, they always sneered at his imaginary grievances, which, coming to his knowledge, was never known to sweeten

his disposition. And thus he lived, and thus he thought, and in this frame of mind was he when that adventure befell him which opens this chronicle.

As he left the police quarters he made hurriedly for his hotel (having long since tired of boarding houses), pressing his hand every now and again to his pocket to feel if the murdered man's gift were still there. It is true he was all aglow to know what that pocket-book contained, and yet, as became one who had gained a reputation for cynicism, he slackened his pace at different intervals with an exclamation of annoyance, for in spite of himself his heart and legs would run away with him. It was now about three o'clock in the morning. The rain had ceased falling, and the broken clouds scampered like mad things across the face of a sickly moon. Here and there he beheld a crouching figure slink away in the darkness, and a police-

man at the corner bade him a cheery good-night, but beyond that the city lay as quiet as a dead thing. At the corner of Bourke and Russell Streets he stood for a moment at the coffee-stall to imbibe a cup of that warm, if somewhat thick, liquid, which masquerades as the berry of Mocha, for he was thoroughly wet and cold. He did not imagine, though, that the little man who came up and ordered a similar drink had followed him every step from the police barracks. The coffee finished, Vincent hurried on to his hotel, which he entered by means of a latch-key, closing the door behind him. The little man before mentioned watched this proceeding from the other side of the street, and then, apparently satisfied, returned whence he had come.

Vincent had, in the meantime, clambered to his room, and though absolutely burning to know what the dead man's book contained, he yet withdrew it leisurely from

his pocket and carefully began to undress. This proceeding he almost dawdled over, wet as he was, for he was of a curious temperament and really loved to sting his impatience. But it is in the nature of things that they shall end, so, notwithstanding his obstruction, the feat of undressing was at length accomplished, and, seizing the book, he jumped into bed. Placing his candle on the table beside him, he began to examine the curiosity from the outside. It was a pocket-book without leaves—one of those little flat receptacles which fold over like a book, in which men carry their cards, letters, or bank-notes if they have any. It was rather old and dilapidated, though it had once been of blue satin embroidered with a spray of flowers; but what colour it might now be called, or what flowers the embroidery was supposed to represent, no man might say. It was encircled with a piece of dirty string, and this, with much

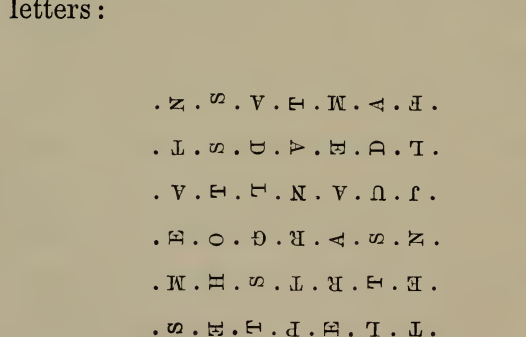
precision, Mr. Vincent untied. Then he calmly scrutinised the twine till his impatience almost choked him, and he was at length constrained to open the book itself, the inside of which was of frayed red silk, and in one corner bore the two letters W. J.

The first article he extracted was an old newspaper account of the death of Ben Hall, with these words underlined, perhaps by W. J.'s own hand. "Hall's last exploit will be too fresh in the minds of our readers to need recapitulation, but it is a singular thing that none of his gang should have known what became of the vast treasure he took from the Mount Marong Escort."

Mr. Vincent pricked up his ears as he read these words, and sitting up in bed began to show a little more interest in the little old pocket-book. Paper after paper he turned out, but they proved of no

consequence, being scraps of Ben Hall's doings, three or four mysteriously worded advertisements which had evidently been inserted in the agony column of some newspaper, a letter from "your pal Jim," and an old telegram addressed to one Williams, which contained three words, the meaning of which was quite beyond Mr. George Vincent's comprehension. This was all. It must be confessed, a feeling of the most acute disappointment took hold of him. He uttered something very like an oath and crushed the little book in his hand, preparatory to hurling it into the grate. As he did so, however, he thought he felt some paper crumble beneath his hands, and carefully straightening out the little article again, he found this thought to be perfectly correct. In a moment he had torn the lining asunder, and there, sure enough, was a piece of soiled yellow paper. With something very like a thrill of expec-

tation, though he would not have owned to it, he cautiously unfolded the crumpled curiosity. It was stained with age, dirty with finger-marks, and sadly frayed at the edges; indeed, its whole form bore eloquent testimony to having weathered many a stormy period. Yet it was none of these things which riveted his attention. He saw the following curious arrangement of letters:



This, to be sure, looked a very formidable thing, and for the moment he thought he had stumbled upon some ancient writing; but, quickly catching the first

idea, he, with the aid of a pencil and a piece of paper, soon had, as it were, the letters on their feet. Then he read them over, first one way and then the other, full twenty times. He formed words easily enough, and thought he had the answer in his head quite half-a-dozen times; but the words were so disjointed that he could make neither head nor tail of them. Yet he firmly believed that he had stumbled on a cipher which, the key once being found, would enable him to bid a long adieu to goose quills and grinning ledgers. He, moreover, had no doubt that it referred to the plant of Hall's—perhaps this very Mount Marong Escort—and he understood now the terror and anger of the dying man, who, knowing its value was yet unable to realise it. For years, no doubt, he had carried this scrap of paper about with him, puzzling over its contents, yet afraid to take anyone into his confidence A for-

tune in his hands, perhaps, and he knew it. Construct those forty-two letters into the proper words, and he might have the secret which would make him rich for life. Yet he had failed to do so, and that paper which he had guarded with his life had at last been the means of his death; for that it was to secure this writing Flash Jim had murdered him, Vincent doubted not.

As the young fellow lay back on his pillow thinking it all out, he pictured Hall and his gang sticking up the Mount Marong Escort, which he knew had been a rich prize; and then that wily one, who so soon after met a violent end, stealing away and burying the greater part of the treasure against a rainy day. And he thought again of the letters, and the good news they might tell if he could only put them together; and he took up the small piece of paper for the twenty-first time, intending to re-peruse it, when his candle suddenly

spluttered and went out. For a long time he lay staring up into the darkness, picturing it with imaginary scenes from the life of the late lamented Mr. Benjamin Hall; and even when he fell asleep, he dreamt all night of letters in cipher and the Mount Marong Escort.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE SIGN OF THE EMU'S HEAD.

THE diggings at Dead Man's Flat had been in full swing for close on five months, and during that time hundreds upon hundreds of men had come and gone, some departing with their pockets full of the precious metal, others poorer than when they arrived. This is the fate which clings to all such places—nay, is it not the fate of every phase of life? The man in the hole a few feet from you may find a deposit which will make him rich for life, while you work day after day, barely gaining enough to keep the breath in your body. This is the sort of fate which, cur-like, worries poor humanity. The rich man's horses splash the poor man's ragged coat; the shop windows

gleam none the less temptingly because countless hungry eyes glare in upon them; the rich feed none the less sumptuously because the thousands starve. This, again, is the fate which it seems necessary the children of men should suffer.

There were rich and poor at Dead Man's Flat, as there are in every community, but there was this difference—the rich man never splashed the poor, never flaunted his riches, which, somehow, made poverty endurable. Indeed, it would have been somewhat difficult to say who were the rich and poor of that busy place, for no one but the men themselves knew their own monetary value. A large felt hat, a pair of big boots (if you could afford them), coarse trousers, and a Crimean shirt, and you had the millionaire or beggar of Dead Man's Flat—though it would be ten to one the beggar was the sprucer of the two. This, however, as most of us may know from

personal experience, is a state of things not confined to any particular locality.

At one time it was thought a new Ballarat or Bendigo had been discovered in this grimly-named place, and men rushed from all parts of the country to participate in the hunt for the yellow metal. Clerks flung aside their pens, barristers their briefs, and even clergymen their prayer-books. The ships in port were deserted by their crews; there they lay upon the waters month after month, with never a soul to man them, in spite of the bribe of high wages. The British squadron lost every man it allowed to step on shore, and numerous stories were told of the blue-jackets letting themselves over the side in the darkness, and, spurning the danger from sharks, strike out for the promised land; even the upright guardians of the law cast aside their helmets and batons for the slouch hat and the pick and shovel. Oh,

they were mad days, when every man, woman, and child had the gold fever fierce upon them; when the pick and shovel were the only implements worth owning, and when he who had no wealth but that of health and courage, set out on his long tramp to the El Dorado. They were strange times, too, and men went about with their lives in their hands; for, what with the convict blood and the blackguardism of California, things were not always too carefully regulated in those mixed masses of humanity. Yet they were man-making epochs, too, and to them Australia owes that sturdy self-reliance which is so conspicuous in her sons. Accustomed to a life of adventure, and inured to hardships consequent upon the opening up of a new country, they have none of those effeminate qualms which the more ancient nations so assiduously cultivate. Their fathers roughed it before them, and they too have

had their share of toil. They have the man's strength with the disdain of trivialities; will take the best that comes and hope for better luck in the future. These men will stand firm in a crisis—ay, and fight, too, when their country needs them.

Dead Man's Flat was now an irregular mass of white canvas tents, dotted here and there with a more substantial hut of bark, while away on the top of the hill, surrounded by a strong fence of saplings, stood a large slab and zinc building, which was used as court-house, police barracks, and hospital. Here the diggers had to come to get their "miner's right," or license, before they were allowed to peg out a claim, or, in other words, to work; for without that government certificate a man was liable to have his claim "jumped" at any moment, his hoardings confiscated, and himself fined. At the foot of the hill above-mentioned a great creek pursued its

irregular course, supplying the miners with plenty of water for their pans and cradles, and like the roar of thunder afar off was the noise of those rocking cradles when the whole camp was in full swing.

To the right of this creek, and stretching away for many miles in the distance, was the rich plain of Dead Man's Flat—rich in two ways; first, because of its alluvial deposits, and secondly, on account of its well-grassed and well-shrubbed surface. This second reason, however, was of little moment to the thousands who swarmed the diggings. They cared not how many sheep and cattle it would raise, or how much good corn might bend its graceful head to every breeze. They had come to work for gold, and to the gold-digger there is no colour but yellow. So they clung to the banks of the great creek and hollowed them out for miles, till one looking at them from a distance saw

nothing but thousands of little mounds. Yet to thread those little hillocks, even in broad day, was a work of no small danger and difficulty, for every mound represented a hole from six to twelve feet deep, and often more, which any false step might precipitate you into, much to the danger of life and limb. To attempt such an undertaking at night was proportionately serious, though the less honest of this mixed community had many a time blessed the darkness and the danger of the road; and many an upright man had trudged off to his claim in the morning only to find that it had been worked out during the night, and that whatever gold it might have yielded had gone into the pockets of another. But honesty, unlike justice, is not always blind. It was rarely robbed a second time, being quick to perceive how much more profitable it was to work out the hole before it left it for the night.

This, however, was but one of the lesser trials to which the good were subjected, for the righteous have many grievous burdens to bear in this world of ours. It was not only that a man had first to find the gold, but it was invariably a greater bother to him, once he had found it, than the want of it had hitherto proved; for if it once became known that he had such and such a sum in his possession, the rascals of the community (and you will find them hanging to the skirts of all classes) at once made it their object to relieve him, in one way or another, of his burden. A revolver in his belt by day, a revolver beneath his head at night. In fact it might be said that he ate, slept, and worked with a revolver in one hand.

Now such a life might be termed exceedingly exciting, and it undoubtedly was, but it was an excitement of which a man might easily tire. It was better to get rid of the

cursed stuff than live in a perpetual torment, and if the digger were a sociable fellow he would make tracks for the nearest grog shanty, and flaunt his riches like a king. There was nothing mean about the digger of those days either. The gold was easily won and easily spent, and he would treat a bar-full of loafers to the best of wine, and then play skittles with quart bottles of champagne in the place of ninepins. They were indeed flourishing times for the genial Boniface, and many a man who is now rolling in riches has good cause to think kindly of the grog shanty his father kept in the early days. The digger, like the proverbial sailor, was generous to a fault. "Here," he would say, "a dozen of your best champagne, and take it out of that," and to the smiling landlord he would toss a bag of gold-dust which would pay for the wine full twenty times. And whenever a theatrical company appeared at that out-of-

the way spot, they were sure of a golden welcome, for the diggers would throw bags of gold-dust at their favourite performers in lieu of bouquets. But after all there is nothing strange in this. The system is still adhered to in many theatres, only the gold is now become solid, and people are more polite—they do not heave their gold like diggers, they present it like gentlemen. One night, so the story goes, a company playing at Dead Man's Flat put up the tragedy of *Hamlet*, but that sombre piece not proving to the taste of the audience, they rebelled when it was half through, stopped the performance, and unanimously demanded a song and dance. And when Hamlet, the Ghost, and Ophelia did a break-down, the little bags of precious dust flew in a shower upon the stage, proving that all concerned were, or should have been, satisfied.

Oh, yes, there was much fun even on

Dead Man's Flat, for there were some jovial boys among that miscellaneous crowd. True the fun was not always dignified nor the humour superfine, but it made men happy, lightened their irksome burdens, and kept them in touch with the human world. It was a bad thing, that gold-fever, worse than many people imagine, and to free men from it, even for an hour, was an inestimable boon. But are we ever free of it, and need we go up the country to Dead Man's Flat to see it? Methinks any great modern city can show more of this most hideous of diseases in one day than such insignificant places as Dead Man's Flat can in a lifetime.

The town, proper, of Dead Man's Flat lay about a mile from the centre of the diggings, though the latter really stretched from the town full five miles down the creek. Some years before the opening of our narrative there had been a Rush in this part of the country, and this township of

which we speak was left as a memento of it. It was the usual one-street village with half-a-dozen public-houses, a couple of weather-board chapels, and sundry other habitations of slabs, zinc, or weather-boards, with here and there an ugly box of German brick. These were all left standing after the first Rush, and when the diggers forsook the place these inelegant edifices fell into general neglect. It was a dull look-out for Dead Man's Flat in those days, and the inhabitants who had known it for the few weeks in which it had flourished, were never tired of singing the glories of the happy past. It was like the Greeks of the present time reviewing the days of old, or the modern Roman contemplating the fact that his townsmen were once the masters of the world—at least, this is how it would have appeared to the old inhabitants, though to the ordinary observer it may have suggested no such thoughts.

Dead Man's Flat, however, struggled on in obscurity for many years, till one day a new vitality was infused into its almost lifeless body. A party of fossickers, after vainly seeking fortune among the ruins of the old diggings, which were above the town, went further down the creek and there struck the rich alluvial deposits, the fame of which was soon to bring thousands of eager workers from all parts of the country. Then the light of joy was once more seen in the eyes of the old inhabitants, and in a fortnight the population rose from one hundred and sixty to ten thousand. Coaches and traps rattled into the old town every hour of the day, and those who had been rich enough to ride reported that hundreds more were tramping in their wake. Oh, there was some life in the old place then, the house of mourning was changed to one of revelry. A dozen new buildings went up every day, and though

they might not have been as durable or picturesque as a Norman tower, they certainly added to the extent and variety of the city.

But of all the jolly places in Dead Man's Flat, the saloon of the Emu's Head was the jolliest, and to this cheerful rendezvous the diggers trooped of a night to drink, smoke, and yarn, and, if they felt so inclined, gamble away their hard-earned gold. Mr. Peter Logan, the worthy gentleman who ruled this abode of Bacchus, had no objection. He had a nice little room there at the back of the bar, nice and quiet-like, and he would even take a hand himself, if the gentlemen had no objection. At first the gentlemen had none, but when Mr. Logan invariably rose with their little bags of gold bulging out his pockets, they grew suspicious, and at last decided that they would no more admit him to their play, telling him that he was much too clever for

them. At this Mr. Logan laughed good-humouredly, confessed they didn't know much about cards, and then asked them if they had any orders to give. A more fastidious person than the rotund Boniface might have felt and shown annoyance at these covert reflections on his honour, but your good landlord never quarrels with your good patron; besides, Mr. Logan's patrons would have taken him up, if he had made himself objectionable, and tossed him from the room without a moment's hesitation.

Mr. Peter Logan, at the time our chronicle opens, was between forty and fifty years of age, fat, red of face, with that hard look about the mouth which comes of a hard life. He was, however, or had been, a man of some presence, and though he may never have been distinctly handsome, he yet bore traces of past good looks. But Mr. Logan, like many more unfortunates, had

run to fat. The friends of our boyhood, the sweethearts of our callow days—where and what are they now? He, poor fellow, has developed an enormous waist, and grunts like a hog when he stoops to lace up those confounded boots; while she, poor thing, her delicate profile gone beneath a shapeless growth, pants and fumes as she struggles to encircle with a twenty-two inch stay a good thirty inches of solid flesh, not counting the hips—which have expanded enormously. Such is the fate to which the decently covered youth may look forward. Her arms are plump now, her breast full; she is a picture-girl. But wait till she is married a few years. Yet, no, no! We cannot even bear to contemplate the cold-blooded, heartless ways of that inexorable tyrant—Time.

Mr. Logan had certainly run to fat, though why he should have done so he could not tell you, because, as he would

explain, as a boy he was nothing better than a skeleton. This is one of the little weaknesses of all stout people. They are eternally cramming down your throat that, once on a time, they were mere shadows of men and women. I never meet my friend Jones without he complains bitterly of his lot. "And yet," he wails, "there was a time when I was as thin as a lath, and had an arm like a candle." Poor old Jones! I never yet called on Mrs. Robinson, who turns the scale at fifteen stone, without hearing her remark, in a casual sort of way, that she wore an eighteen-inch corset on the day of her marriage. Now it is my private opinion that she and Jones were always inclined to obesity, and I likewise believe that Mr. Logan was doomed from birth to carry more than his just portion of flesh, for I never met anyone who ever knew him when he wasn't "stoutish." Anyway, as he stands in the far corner of his

bar to-night, his shirt-sleeves rolled up to his fat elbows, no collar on his fat neck (Mr. Logan never wore a collar—he hadn't room for one), and a big cigar stuck in his mouth, which he occasionally withdraws from that sweet receptacle with his left hand, the third finger of which is missing, though the other three are profusely bedecked with jewels, he looks the strangest mixture of man and beast that one could wish to see. How he ever induced that dashing woman over yonder to marry him is a thing none of his patrons can comprehend. But that by the way. At present he is deep in conversation with a somewhat shaggy-looking individual, who every now and again sweeps the saloon with a quick glance from a pair of hard black eyes.

The fun, however, continues with undiminished vigour; songs are sung, jokes cracked, and occasionally some inebriate lurches into the middle of the floor and

begins a step-dance, which is invariably wound up by a breakdown of the right sort; for someone, equally drunk, unexpectedly launches into him, and both go sprawling to the floor. Others, the more dashing of the assembly, fellows who tidy themselves up before they come out for the night, who have lady mothers and sisters in different part of the country, or who, perchance, were somebodies away in England, once on a time (for all classes and conditions meet on the Australian goldfields), these, I say, lounge over the bar, making violent love to the pretty landlady. But she takes their pleasantries good-naturedly, laughs when they laugh; though she brings them sharply up if they attempt undue familiarities. But they all like her, and will put up with anything she says or does, for is she not singularly attractive, and does not the poet tell us that beauty will draw men by a single hair? And she

is decidedly pretty, or, rather, handsome. There is not another woman like her in the place, and if you were to question the diggers they would declare to a man that she was the finest woman they had ever set eyes on. And she was the sort of woman for whom such men might be expected to possess unbounded admiration. Tall and strong; a figure as firm and upright as an athlete's; yet splendidly symmetrical—a woman all over. A clear fresh face, dark but wonderfully sweet; a full mouth, capable of the sweetest and most contemptuous of expressions; two great brown burning eyes. Such was Mrs. Catherine Logan, or, as she was familiarly termed (behind her back), "Kitty of the Emu's Head"—for such was the title of a ballad which some poetic digger had penned in her honour.

How such a woman had ever condescended to link her life with Mr. Peter

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Logan was, as we have said, the greatest puzzle to her numerous admirers; and more than one drunken man had put the question to her, only to be snapped at for his pains, and laughed at by his companions. Logan was not a half-bad sort of fellow, everybody admitted that, and if he was fat and coarse-looking, that was merely a misfortune which might befall any man; yet there was something indescribable about him which made the match seem ludicrous, and no one could look at husband and wife without wondering how the two ever came together. Woman's perversity, they supposed. No one yet had ever been able to account for the ways of the sex; and they could no more understand this union than the ordinary person can understand why the delicately-nurtured young lady should be depraved enough to elope with her groom.

The dandies of the diggings swarm about

her to-night as usual; they open the bottles for her, and beg to be allowed to come behind the bar and wash up the glasses, but to all these entreaties she turns a deaf ear, nor does she seem to know that they are paying her the most extravagant compliments. She seems pre-occupied, ill at ease, and every moment she can spare from her duties her eyes flash towards the door. She evidently expects someone, and presently that expectation is gratified. The door swings back and a young man enters the saloon. The woman's eyes emit a glad light, and her hand trembles so that the neck of the bottle rings on the rim of the tumbler.

CHAPTER II.

A DAUGHTER OF THE TAP-ROOM.

THE young man, in the meantime, after passing a word or two here and there with some acquaintances, makes his way towards the bar and smilingly acknowledges the handsome landlady's salutation.

"So you have come?" she said. "I thought we were never going to see any more of you."

"Why," he laughed, "it is only four days since I was here last."

"Four days," she repeated reproachfully, turning the full strength of her wonderful eyes upon him.

"You see," he went on a little confusedly, "after a hard day's work a fellow

naturally requires a little rest, and I do work down on the Flat there, and no mistake."

"If you cared to come," she replied, "you would not make these excuses."

He laughed a little oddly. "Of course I care. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why should you?" There was a suddenness about this question which made it almost embarrassing.

"To see you," he answered boldly.

She looked at him with a peculiar, earnest expression; a quick, piercing look, as though she would read every page of his heart.

"George," she said sadly, yet half-savagely too, "you should never trifle with a woman."

"I am not trifling," he replied. "If I did not come to see you, pray tell me what was the attraction?"

"How should I know?"

"You do not suppose it was Logan?" he laughed.

"No, Mr. Vincent, I do not." She too laughed as she spoke, and turned away with a quivering smile about the corners of her pretty mouth; but as she looked down into his handsome face, those starving eyes of hers devoured his every feature.

Mr. Vincent, for he it was whom we last saw studying the murdered man's cipher in bed, turned his back upon the bar, lit his pipe and began to look about him. He is three years older now than he was on the night of that memorable storm in Melbourne. He has flung aside the pen for independence and the open air. No longer the slave of a dingy desk, the sport of grinning ledgers, he now roams the country at his own sweet will, and though he finds the life extremely hard at times, he yet resolutely rejects the temptation to take up his perch once more on the top of an office

stool. He has determined to see what fate may have in store for him, and though he feels that the pen will inevitably fall into his hand, and that he shall end his days dozing over ledgers, he tries to forget that there is any age but youth, or that the trade of clerkship exists except as a nightmare in his own imagination.

It is a good two years since he cast aside the "inky cloak" to go into the country, for from the night when he first tried to unravel Hall's cipher his office became worse than a dungeon. It was stifling, unbearable; and one day he jumped from his stool, flung his pen at the shelves of grinning ledgers, put on his hat and walked out. Since then he had endured much, seen much, and if his heart ever upbraided him for his rashness, his determination trampled the softer feeling out. And so when the Rush broke out at Dead Man's Flat, he shouldered his swag and moved

on with the tide; and this is why we find him to-night in the bar of the "Emu's Head." His new life, however unsuccessful it may have been from a social or monetary point of view, was a great success physically. His usually pale face was now splendidly bronzed, his eyes and brain were clear, his frame strong. Those fingers which used to itch for something more formidable than a pen, were now broad and hard as leather, and when he took you by the hand in his hearty way, you felt them twine round your own like strips of supple steel.

"George."

"Well?"

He turned hastily round. The landlady was in her place again.

"You were dreaming?"

"Was I?"

"Yes. What was it about?"

"Why, you, of course."

"Oh, of course. But I have something to tell you. My cousin Edith is coming up to-morrow."

"Is she indeed? And who is cousin Edith?"

"Don't be flippant, George. Cousin Edith is an orphan—the child of my mother's sister."

"Oh! Is she pretty?"

"Pretty! That's all you men think of."

"How could I think of anything else?" he said, looking up into her face.

She blushed, but answered quietly, "Yes, I should say she would grow very pretty."

"Is she a baby?" he asked with a comical look of consternation.

"No," she laughed, "not quite. She was fifteen or sixteen when I last saw her, and that's nearly five years ago. Dear me, how the time flies. How old I must be getting."

Mr. Vincent could not ignore such a palpable invitation, so looking her straight in the eyes he said something which made her flush and tremble all over.

"Go along," she said. "I know you don't mean a word of it."

"I swear to you—" he began.

"Hush, George," she said earnestly, "you should not fill a woman's heart with words you do not mean."

"Well then," he said, trying to laugh it off, for he had seen how seriously the woman had taken his banter, "we'll say I was only joking. Come now, tell me more of cousin Edith."

"No. I shall be jealous of her."

"But am I not your devoted slave? You do not doubt my allegiance to your majesty's person? Look at Logan, how he scowls at me. I believe he would take me on if he thought he could give me a licking. How do, Pete?" he cried as he caught the

landlord's eye at that moment. "Poor old chap, he looks a bit off colour," he continued, turning to the wife.

"I think he has been a little upset these last few days."

"That won't do," said the young man, laughing. "He'll be losing some of his superfluous if he doesn't watch it. Who's the friend?"

"I don't know. Smith he calls him, but whether that's his real name or not, I know no more than you."

"It's a safe one, any way. I don't think much of his looks."

"No; he is not a beauty. He came here two days ago and claimed immediate friendship with Pete. At first my husband seemed a little flurried over his arrival, but soon they were chatting away with apparent pleasure and interest. Ever since then they have been as thick as thieves."

"Pete doesn't seem to be very particular."

A look of unutterable disgust curled itself round her pouting lips, but she said nothing. Vincent, thinking he trod upon dangerous ground, got off with no little alacrity.

"Come," he said abruptly, "tell me some more about cousin Edith."

"I have nothing to tell you beyond the fact that her mother has just died, that I am her nearest relation, and that she is coming to me."

"Do you think she will like this sort of life?"

"I should think not. She was brought up very genteelly, I believe. Her father was a civil servant, or something of that sort. Mother used to say that they lived in very good style once."

"I'm afraid she won't like this place."

"Then she must lump it," said Mrs.

Logan flippantly, and bounded away to attend to the wants of a noisy customer.

"Poor child," thought George, thinking of the cousin Edith, "if she has been brought up like a lady, what a hell to come to." And turning, he surveyed the crowded saloon with his first feeling of repugnance. After all, he had lost much in quitting the ways of civilised men and women, and though he flirted hard with the handsome landlady, for he admired her greatly both as a woman and a beautiful creature, he yet confessed to himself that she was scarcely a proper guardian for a delicately nurtured girl, nor was the "Emu's Head" a house into which he would have cared to see anyone enter whom he respected. Still, it was no affair of his, and it was deuced good of Kitty to give the luckless girl a shelter. Besides, the girl might not be so fastidious as he imagined, and might revel in the

vulgar pomp and glitter of the place, the admiration of the dandy diggers. She would be married in a month—or gone to the dogs.

Here his further ruminations came to a sudden and ungallant close, for he speedily lost all thought of the girl in listening to a dozen diggers, who, all speaking at once, were discussing the origin of the name Dead Man's Flat.

"It took its name," one of the men was saying in a loud, authoritative tone, like one who knows all about it, "from Dead Man's Creek, the creek what runs through this here diggins."

George smiled as he listened, for the gentleman who was holding forth with such authority was his mate, Phil Thomas, an honest enough fellow in every respect and an excellent worker, but too fond of company and the social glass ever to be aught but a rolling-stone.

"And how was that?" asked one, evidently a new arrival.

"Well," said Phil, twisting his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other, "it happened before the first rush, you see, which was a good twelve year ago, and came about in this way. A party of prospectors discovered the body of a man about half a mile up the creek, and it was while they were a diggin' of his grave that they turned up a nugget weighing close on two pound. That was the beginning of the first rush, mates, and that's how the place got to be called Dead Man's Flat."

"Nothing of the sort," exclaimed an old fellow who had just come up in time to hear this speech, "that's nothing like it, Phil."

"Well, Tommy," answered the worthy Phil, "I bow to you, old boy, but I stick to my own story."

"You'd stick to anything you laid your hands on," replied the old man sourly. "But I've lived here off and on for the last fifteen year, and we, at least, called this place Dead Man's Flat for an entirely different reason."

"Then let us hear your version, Tommy. It isn't a matter of much consequence, any way."

"Then let me tell you," said the old fellow seating himself, while the crowd about him increased, and even the landlord and his companion drew a little nearer, all eyes and ears, "that it was called Dead Man's Flat because it was here a party of bushmen strung up Jack Morgan—one of Ben Hall's early pals. And I'll tell you how it was, too. Morgan was a desperate, bloodthirsty fellow, and he actually had the ordacity to stick up, single-handed, half-a-dozen bushmen. Now some bushmen is pretty tough in their ways, and one of 'em,

instead of obeying Jack's cry to throw his hands up, drew his revolver; but, before he could shoot, Jack downed him like a dingo. This raised the other fellows' blood. They rushed at Morgan, and before he had time to say his prayers the rope was round his neck and he was swinging from a branch of the big gum what's standing by the road to this very day. And that's why we called the place Dead Man's Flat," added the old man emphatically, "for we left Morgan swinging till the crows had done their duty."

"Well, we won't quarrel about how it got its name," said the man Phil. "But were you really one of the bushmen who lynched Jack Morgan?"

"I were," said Tommy, "and any one of us would have been a match for him—or Ben Hall either," the old man added defiantly.

"Did Hall's gang infest these parts?"

asked Vincent, interested in spite of himself.

"Ay, that they did," said old Tommy, "once or twice. Don't you know that it was only three mile from this very town that they stuck up the Mount Marong Escort?"

"The Mount Marong Escort!" involuntarily exclaimed the young fellow. Then he looked about him with a smile of apology, and wondered if people would understand his exclamation. Of course not; how foolish of him! Yet, when he encountered the eyes of Mr. Peter Logan, who with his companion, Smith, had advanced to within easy earshot of the old man, he saw something so strange in them that he regretted not having kept his tongue between his teeth.

"Yes, the Mount Marong Escort," repeated the old fellow, "and a tidy haul it was. Over six thousand ounces of gold,

gentlemen—twenty-five thousand pound, if it was a penny. That's the way Ben Hall and his gang did bushranging in those days." There was a ring of pride in the old fellow's voice as he spoke, and he surveyed the listening assembly with a look which plainly asked the question, What do you think of that?

"That must have set them up for life, once they get clear away with it?" It was Vincent who spoke, his voice quivering, notwithstanding his seeming indifference.

"That's just it," said the old fellow; "*did* they get away with it? The gang never got anything but a few hundred pounds between them, because when they were broke up, and Ben himself killed, they said that it was believed that he and his lieutenant, Billy Jackson, had planted it somewhere."

George immediately bethought him of

the letters W. J. in the murdered man's pocket book, and he also recollected that the man had repeated some of "Old Ben's" words; old Ben, of course, being no other than this same Ben Hall.

"And was this Billy Jackson killed with Hall?"

"No. He, with Flash Jim, Snaky Steve, and one or two others, escaped. They fetched him up, though, near the Queensland border—somewhere on the Darling. What became of Jim Regan, or Flash Jim, as they used to call him, nobody knows, but I guess he's gone under long ago."

"Then it must have been within the last three years, for three years ago, this winter, Flash Jim and another murdered Billy Jackson in Little Lonsdale Street, Melbourne."

"How do you know that?" It was Logan who asked the question, suddenly, almost fiercely.

"Because," said George, turning to answer him, "I—I—knew the fellow who ran to his assistance!"

"Was it you?"

"Well, yes, it was." All eyes were instantly turned on Vincent, who, it must be confessed, bore himself with no little modesty, considering the greatness which was thus thrust upon him; for to have been mixed up in any way with Hall or his gang was to become, in the eyes of the diggers, a person of consequence.

"But come, mate," said old Tommy, who did not like the interest centred in anyone but himself, "How did you know it was Billy Jackson?"

"I did not know till this moment. He spoke of Flash Jim; he said Flash Jim had done it. He called himself Billy; he also spoke of 'Old Ben.'"

"That's him, sure enough," cried Tommy. "Killed by his own pals."

"Did he tell you why Flash Jim had murdered him?" It was Logan who spoke.

Vincent glanced up at him, and was startled by the strange look in the man's face. It was paler than he had ever noticed it before, and there was an eager ness in the eyes which gave to them a singularly inhuman expression. The whole story trembled on the young man's tongue, but that one sharp glance at the landlord restrained him—he knew not why.

"No," he replied, "the man died when the police came up." Logan and his friend Smith exchanged a series of deep meaning looks which did not altogether escape Vincent's prying eyes, for he was wide awake now, and, fearful lest he had said too much, thought once more of the cipher which had lain so long neglected in the bottom of his trunk.

"Well, that's a mighty queer story you

tell, mate," said the old man, Tommy, rising and preparing to go, "and I shouldn't be surprised if Stephen Jones wasn't the one who helped Jim Regan to do away with Billy; for Snaky Steve, as they used to call him, was notorious for his villainy. I wonder what old Ben would say if he heard the yarn. Fancy a man's pals turning on him like that; but it's just what Stephen Jones would have done. Poor old Billy—he was the best of the crowd. It's a pity he didn't give you the secret, though. There's thousands of pounds lying hid somewhere within twenty miles of this place, or I'm a Dutchman."

"Perhaps Jackson did not know the secret; in fact, he could not have known it, or he would never have left the gold lying idle."

"That's so. Ben was a mighty 'cute 'un. Good-night, gentlemen; good-night," and the old fellow wobbled off.

"Now then, gentlemen," cried Logan, "time's up, please." Then, beckoning Vincent to him, he said, "we'll have a glass together when they're gone. Will you join us, Sam?" This to the gentleman who rejoiced in the honest patronymic of Smith. Mr. Smith said he would be delighted, and then the crowd began to file out, the man Phil singing a charming panegyric on the late lamented Mr. Benjamin Hall, the last verse of which ran as follows:

"Now Ben he was as nice a man
As one could wish to see,
And would have graced a silken rope
And dangled handsomely!
But fate ordained the rifle's roar,
Should prove his parting knell,
And so he robs on earth no more,
But bails them up in h—, h—, h—!
But bails them up in h—!"

CHAPTER III

A FATAL MOMENT.

George made his way into the private parlour at the back of the bar, and was immediately joined by Mr. Smith, who at once began to ask him sundry commonplace questions in reference to the diggings.

"You're a stranger, eh?" asked the young fellow.

"Yes," said the man with a queer smile, "that is, not altogether, though it's many years since I passed through this district."

"Before the first rush?"

"Yes. You see, I come from the New South Wales side."

"This was rather an out-of-the-way place to fetch in those days, wasn't it?"

"Well it was, rather—but I had to pass through on my way to the Mount Marong Gold-fields."

"So, you were at Mount Marong?"

"Oh, yes," replied the man with just a little hesitation.

"When Hall stuck-up the escort?"

"Yes, sir. Some of my hard-earned dust, that I was sending across to the missis in Sydney, was among the swag. Oh, he was a terrible fellow, was Ben Hall."

"Who's talking about Ben Hall?" asked Mr. Logan, entering at that moment with a bottle of whiskey and some glasses, "Who's taking old Ben's name in vain?" And then, with a broad grin, he sang the last two lines of the exquisite stanza which concluded the preceding chapter; while Mr. Smith, who seemed immensely tickled by the relation of Ben's doings in the nether world, pronounced the final word with wonderful *verve*.

"This gentleman was telling me," said Vincent, when the hilarity had somewhat subsided, "that he was at Mount Marong when Hall stuck-up the escort."

"No, were you, Sammy?" asked the landlord, a broad smile illumining his fat face, "were you though?"

"I was," said Mr. Smith, "and what's more, Peter, I sent my savings by that particular escort."

"That was a bit of bad luck," said Logan with a grin, "a bit of awful bad luck. Say when, Mr. Vincent," he added, pouring out the whiskey.

"Thank you," said George.

"Lord, man," laughed the landlord, "that's not half a tumbler. You wouldn't have done for Forest Creek, I can tell you."

"Nor Mount Marong either," added Mr. Smith.

"Talking about Mount Marong," exclaimed the landlord, as though the mention

of that name had brought back to him a sudden recollection of the place, "that was a queer sort of yarn you told to-night."

"Very pe-culiar," added Mr. Smith, dipping his ugly face deep into his tumbler.

"What, you mean that about the murder of Billy Jackson in Little Lonsdale Street?"

"Yes. I suppose it was Jackson?" queried the landlord.

"I guess as much," replied the young man, "especially after what old Tommy has told us to-night."

"Tommy's a gibbering old jackass," cried Logan impetuously, "and knows no more of Ben Hall than a cuckoo. Why," he continued in an aggrieved and personal tone as he handed round a box of cigars, "if you'd listen to him he'd make Hall out a regular hero, when in reality he was the most infernal scoundrel that ever took to the bush."

"He was," repeated Mr. Smith with a

slow shake of his head, "he was a sad blackguard, was Ben.

> "'And so he robs on earth no more,
> But bails them up in——'"

"Hero!" exclaimed the landlord, cutting short this vocal outburst, "he hadn't the decency of a common pickpocket."

"One does not expect decency in a bushranger," said Vincent with a smile.

"Well, perhaps not," replied Logan in a gentler tone, "but I can't bear to think that even a bushranger should turn on a pal."

"Nor me," said Mr. Smith, "nor me."

"That's right enough," said George; "but in what way did Hall turn on his pals?"

"Did you ever hear how they stuck-up the Mount Marong Escort?" asked the landlord.

"I can't say that I have. All I know of

Hall has been picked up in the most casual manner."

"Well," replied the worthy Boniface, "I guess I'm getting on twenty years older than you, and I remember the occurrence as though it was only yesterday."

"And me," said Mr. Smith, stealing a swift glance at his companion, "and me."

"It happened not five miles down the creek," continued the landlord. "We'll walk there one Sunday if you like, and I'll show you the very spot." George said he would go with pleasure, and Mr. Smith also expressed a desire to make one of the party, declaring it would be quite an interesting event. The landlord smiled, and continued. "It was usual for the Escort to leave Mount Marong at the beginning of every month, but previous to the setting out of this one, the turn-over at the diggings had been enormous, and this, it is believed, came to Hall's knowledge. So he got his gang to-

gether, and when the Escort came up they blazed away at it like a set of devils. Five troopers were killed outright, and three more dangerously wounded; two of Hall's fellows dropped with bullets in them, and even old Ben himself had a bit of his cheek shot away."

"No, his ear, Peter," contradicted Mr. Smith.

"Yes, Sammy, I believe you're right, though it's so long ago since I read of the affair that I've almost forgotten it. But all the same, might I enquire who's telling this story, you or me?"

"You, Peter."

"Oh, I thought you were," said Mr. Logan sarcastically. "Well," he continued, "the bushrangers got the gold, over six thousand ounces, and how much do you think that thief Hall gave to the gang?"

"I couldn't say."

"Of course not," exclaimed Mr. Smith hurriedly, "nor you neither, Peter."

"I can't say for certain," replied Mr. Logan, with a slight embarrassment, which he endeavoured to hide by pulling furiously at his cigar, "but I know what I read, Sammy."

"Of course," said Mr. Smith, "you naturally would. Here's to you, old pal," and he drank a health to the genial Peter. But the look which passed between them did not altogether escape Mr. Vincent. He had suddenly grown extremely suspicious of these two men, and watched them closely. Interest in everything that concerned the outlaw, Hall, once more revived, and he was anxious to again peruse the cipher he had despised so long. Moreover, he had not forgotten the strange look in Logan's face that night, when he told of the murder in Melbourne; besides which, he remembered the story Kitty had related of

her husband's strange behaviour on the occasion of Smith's first appearance at the "Emu's Head." These things he ran rapidly over in his mind, thinking less favourably of Logan and his friend as he did so. Who they were he had not the remotest idea, but that they were what they would seem to be, he doubted.

"You were speaking of the division Hall made of the booty," said Vincent, ejecting huge clouds of smoke from his mouth, which, like a veil, partially screened his somewhat anxious face.

"Was I?" asked the landlord, trying to look unconscious of any such intention.

"Of course you was, Peter," said Mr. Smith.

"Oh, of course," replied Logan, smiling affably. "I remember reading a full account of it at the time. They said he only gave the members of his gang a

hundred quid a piece. Is that what you would call honour among thieves?"

"No, Peter, it is not," said Mr. Smith, shaking his head sadly.

"Do you mean to say he kept the rest?" asked Vincent.

"Every blessed farthing."

"But it was a wonder his gang allowed him."

"They were afraid of him."

"And what is he supposed to have done with all that gold?"

"Hid it — planted it," exclaimed the landlord fiercely, "that's what he done with it."

It was strange how the worthy host came out with his vulgarisms when excited.

"But he could not very well hide such a quantity of gold without some sort of aid? May he not have taken it away with him?"

"Not he—because he was shot soon after, over the border there," and he waved his hand towards the New South Wales side.

"Did you ever hear what became of the rest of his gang?"

"No," said the landlord, a little nervously, "no, I can't say that I did. But I suppose that was Billy Jackson you saw that night in Melbourne."

"No doubt. He said a certain Flash Jim had done it. Who was this Flash Jim?"

Logan was too busy pulling at his cigar to reply, but Mr. Smith answered for him.

"Flash Jim was the gentleman of the gang. He wasn't much of a fighting man, and didn't par-ticularly care for the smell of powder, or the sight of a trooper, but they say he used to do all Ben's spying; go into the towns and do the gentleman, you know;

pick up all the information he could, and keep the gang well posted with the movements of the police."

"I suppose he was brave enough to attack an unarmed man?"

Smith laughed curiously, and Logan took a long pull at his tumbler.

"I daresay he would have preferred a mate even then," said Smith with a cheerful chuckle.

"He had one the night he murdered Jackson, for I saw two men."

"Did you?" Messrs. Logan and Smith put the question at the same moment.

"Would you know 'em again?" asked the landord.

"Bless you, no. I only saw their figures in the distance—caught a glimpse of them as they dashed away under a lamp."

"It was a pity you didn't see their faces."

"It was," repeated Mr. Smith. "Such rascals deserve no mercy."

"They'll chum with Jack Ketch before long, never fear."

Mr. Smith shook his head as though thoroughly convinced that sooner or later they would come to a violent end.

"But this man," said the landlord, returning to the subject of the murder, "didn't he say anything before he died?"

"Oh, yes, he said a great deal."

"Ah!"

They both leant forward eagerly.

"A great deal about this Flash Jim—whom he stigmatised as a coward of the first water."

"Did he now?" laughed Mr. Smith.

Logan took another drink, seeming moody and pre-occupied.

"Is that all he did?" he asked somewhat sullenly.

"Well, he did talk some rubbish about

a fortune, which went in at one ear and out the other. He died as the police came up."

"Now, if he had only told you how to find that fortune?" suggested Logan with an insinuating smile.

"If he had," replied the young man, "I should not be here now. Besides, if it really was Hall's lieutenant, is it likely he would have let a fortune lie idle?"

"But he couldn't have known where it was."

"Then how could he have told me?"

"Of course," said Mr. Smith, looking hard at the landlord, "it stands to reason that if Billy Jackson had known where Ben's plant was, he would have unearthed it long ago; and if he didn't know, how could he possibly tell this gentleman? It's my opinion," continued Mr. Smith impressively, "that Hall never had no plant; or if he had his own friends must

have collared it years ago." And having thus delivered himself, he solemnly struck a match and proceeded to re-light his cigar.

"That's my own opinion, Sammy," said the landlord.

"And mine," echoed Vincent.

"What's that?" asked Kitty, entering at that moment with the books and the money.

"Nothing that you would understand, old girl," said Logan with a smile.

"If it's within range of your intellect, its not beyond the reach of mine," she replied,

"Bray-vo!" said Mr. Smith. "You've got your match there, Peter."

"She doesn't mean it," replied Logan. "You've got to let them talk a bit, you know, to make up for their other deficiencies."

"Deficiencies," echoed his wife, "I'd

like to know where you'd be if I didn't look after you?"

"In quod," suggested Smith with a chuckle.

Logan laughed.

"Perhaps," he said. "Anyway, Kit," he continued, "you're the Queen of Dead Man's Flat, ain't you? and you know I worship the very ground you tread on?"

"You're drunk," she cried disdainfully, the blood rushing to her face.

"Not drunk, Kit," he laughed, "but hoping to be, my girl, hoping to be," and lifting his glass he drained it with a gesture of bravado.

Mr. Smith chuckled and likewise took a lengthened dip into his tumbler,

"I think I shall be toddling," said Vincent, rising. He had no wish to participate in the family brawl. He felt extremely sorry for her, for he knew the man's coarseness was a constant shock to

her more sensitive nature. And yet it was what she might have expected from such a union, though how it ever came about was none the less a puzzle to him.

"What, so soon?" asked the landlord.

"Well, you know, I have a good mile to tramp."

"Of course. I had quite forgotten that. Why don't you come into the town to live? Why not put up here with us?"

"Too far from work, Pete. Good-night."

"Good-night. Oh, Kitty, would you mind seeing Mr. Vincent to the door?"

She nodded acquiescence to the suggestion.

"Pray don't let me trouble you, Mrs. Logan," began the young fellow.

"It's no trouble," she said, looking straight into his eyes. Then, without another word, they quitted the room together.

As soon as the door had closed upon

them, Messrs. Logan and Smith stared significantly at each other for the space of twelve seconds. Then Mr. Smith broke the silence.

"It's him," he whispered, emphasising the objective case.

"Sure enough," answered Logan, in the tone of a stage conspirator.

"I wonder if old Billy gave him the paper?"

"Devil a doubt."

"But he can't have read it, Peter?"

"I think not. He's pretty green."

"Perhaps not so green as we imagine; perhaps old Billy said a sight more than he would have us believe. Anyway, he can't suspect that——"

"No. But I'll tell you what, mate," a low, hard look came into Logan's fat face as he spoke, "we must get that paper."

"We must," repeated Mr. Smith, putting his shaggy brows together and peering

from under them with his glittering eyes. "And that young fellow's got it."

"We must be friends with him, Sammy."

"Yes. Now, if we could only get the missis——" suggested Mr. Smith with a knowing leer.

"You think he's gone there, eh?"

"You hit it first pop. But she's a pretty hard girl to drive, isn't she?"

"A devil, mate, a she-cat, that's what she is. Get her back up and she wouldn't stop at putting a bullet through you."

"Well, we must wait. It's not the first time we have had to do it. A fortune like this is worth both waiting and working for. Twenty thousand pound if it's a penny."

"Yes, Sammy," said Mr. Logan, in a thoughtful sort of way, "twenty thousand pound. Ten thousand each, and America. What do you think of it, old pal?"

"It makes my mouth water. But the missis?"

"Wait," said Mr. Logan impressively. A look of confidence wreathed Mr. Smith's face into an ugly smile. Then the two worthies pledged each other in silence.

In the meantime George and Kitty were wending their way through the dark passage which led to the front door, he stumbling, she speaking no word; though he could tell by the short gasps which ever and anon rose from her throat that she was strangely excited. On he stumbled, however, and in stretching forth his hands to grope his way, his right hand accidentally encountered hers.

"I had better lead the way," she said, and her hand tightened in his. It was a firm hand, strong and yet well-covered, and as her palm pressed his he felt it burn.

"You seem a bit upset," he said. "You are not yourself to-night."

"Do you think so?" She laughed a low, hysterical little laugh.

"I do. What's the matter?"

"What right have you to ask?" she said almost fiercely. "What do you care?"

"Of course I care. Aren't we old friends?"

"Friends!" she laughed disdainfully "Yes, I suppose so."

"Kitty," he whispered, so low that it seemed like a soft sigh.

She stopped and took his hand in both of hers.

"Well?" she said.

He could not see her face, but he knew by the intense whisper, the hard way her breath came, the pressure on his hand, that she was more than a friend to him then. The next moment he had taken her in his arms and was kissing her passionately.

"Oh, George, George," she murmured reproachfully. And yet that was the happiest moment of her life, and as she nestled for that brief space on his breast she felt as though the heavens had opened to her.

But he, misunderstanding that tone, withdrew his arms from about her and stepped back.

"You are right," he said, in a low, hurried voice. "I am an infernal scoundrel. Forgive me, won't you?"

"Yes, yes." And yet she would have given her soul to have felt his arms go round her again. But woman's training forbids her to be aught but passive. If she advances she is bold; if of a modest and retiring nature, she is cold, and the last state is worse than the first. Still, being but human, though so much nearer the angels, how more than heroic is that self-restraint which, like a band of steel, confines the invisible forces!

Kitty, as we have seen, was not surrounded by the most precious of home influences, yet, years ago, before her mother died, she had known what it was to walk in the strictest path; and those whose early training has been pure, no matter how lowly, can never be wholly bad. Black they may be to the view, black even their deeds, but hidden away somewhere there is a white spot, which, if you only touch it, will sparkle like a star. There might have been some excuse for any falling away on her part at this particular moment, for her heart beat wildly and every pulse in her body throbbed to bursting point; yet that indescribable force which keeps a woman in her place held her back. At his request she would have thrown herself in his arms and wept her weakness on his breast, but she could not have thrust herself forward even though her heart broke at the restraint. And yet she was a woman of fierce impulse

and strong passion, and one whom nobody would credit with the power of self-restraint. Bold, even, she was reckoned in the town, and many a story was told of her saucy answers to inebriate admirers, while one and all declared that she was a flaunting Tartar who wouldn't think twice of putting a bullet through you. It may therefore be presumed that she did not get that unenviable reputation for nothing, though, no doubt, like most reputations, it was grossly exaggerated. Yet with it all, she trembled like a frightened child as she stood there beside him, and could not, though you promised her the world, have thrown her arms round his neck and said, "I love you."

With a world of bewildering thoughts in her mind, and a very tempest of passion in her breast, she groped her way to the street door and opened it. He, slipping by her, stepped out upon the footpath. Looking

up at her, for she stood high above him on the door-step, he took her hand to say good night, instead of speaking the words and hurrying on, no matter how abruptly.

"I am sorry I so far forgot myself," he said penitently. "It was mean of me to take advantage thus. You will forgive me, won't you?"

"You know I will," she said. His hand lingered in hers—a fatal contact.

"We'll be the same good friends?" he asked.

"Yes, yes. Always—always," she sobbed hysterically, snatching her hand from him. "Now go—go!"

"Then you are angry with me?" he went on, startled at the passion in her voice, and blundering blindly as only a man can.

"I should be, but I cannot. There—go, go!" She held out her hand, which but a moment before she had so abruptly with-

drawn; he caught it between his own and carried it to his lips.

"There," he said, "let that be a truce between us."

"Don't you know," she cried suddenly, fiercely—"don't you know that I—Oh, George, George!" The cry sounded like a sob of rage and pain. And then the barrier fell down before her. Her arms went round his neck, she pressed his face passionately to her breast. Then, with a strange, shuddering gesture, she pushed him from her, and, without another word, slammed the door upon him.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARRIVAL OF COUSIN EDITH.

There was a full house at the "Emu's Head" on the following night, for it had been hinted abroad that Kitty's cousin was coming; and sure enough at half-past eight that night Kitty led her into the bar and introduced her to her more intimate acquaintances, though there was one for whom she looked in vain. The girl remained only for about half an hour and then retired to rest, if she could, for it was a strange sight she saw; but during the whole of that evening Kitty kept her burning eyes on the door, and every time it swung back her heart gave a great thump. As the time flew on she grew peevish, irritable; snapped all who spoke to her,

and served up whisky when she was asked for gin. Would he come, was he annoyed? She didn't want his love, no, no! She had wrestled long with herself, last night, and her own good sense had pointed out to her that such love as they might know, was not the love for which she sighed. He would disdain her if he knew her thoughts, for that he did not love her, her own heart repeated with brutal persistency. True, he had taken her in his arms, he had kissed her with a fervour which was maddening, but he had repented of it the next moment. She needed no other proof than this to tell her her love was vain. No man repents having kissed the woman of his heart; rather is it a thought on which he lingers lovingly. Yet his kisses burnt all the same; the sting was on her lips but the honey had slid into her blood, poisoned, it is true, and hot as liquid fire, but the sweetness was there and it drove her mad.

The next night he came not, nor the next, but on the fourth evening the door swung back and in he walked. She saw him and trembled like one suddenly stricken with ague, but was able to compose herself before he reached the bar. He, too, felt a little flurried, for though he had begged and received her pardon, he knew there was that between them which must alter the friendly relations hitherto existing. Moreover, he was angry with himself for having given way to a moment of passion, and more angry still to think that in a wanton moment he might have wrecked this woman's happiness. He was no egoist, neither was he blind. They had been good friends for a long time, and he knew that he possessed a warm corner in her heart; but he never thought of love, or if he did, it was but to chase it away the next moment. But now there had been that between them which had rent the veil

asunder; he saw and was sorry. He would have given much to have been able to undo the past, to have taken her hand and looked into her eyes as he used to look; laugh up into her face and tell her that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He could never do those things again. That palm of hers would always burn for him, and he would see something in those eyes which no one else detected. He silently vowed that he would go to the "Emu's Head" no more, and for three days stuck tenaciously to his purpose. Then he began to reconsider his decision. It would look as though something had really happened if he continued to absent himself from his old friends. She might think he was afraid to meet her; she might account for his absence in a dozen ways, every one of which might be entirely wrong. Therefore he would let her see that he wished to forget certain things, and remember only

that they were very good friends. So on the fourth day he went. But he felt rather queer as he walked up to her and held out his hand.

"Good evening, Mrs. Kitty."

"Good evening, Mr. Vincent."

But her palm tingled in his, and he caught a reproachful look in her great brown eyes.

"Where have you been so long?"

"My dear Mrs. Kitty," he said lightly, "you seem to forget that I am a hard-working man."

"Oh, yes, I understand. But surely that ought not to make one forget one's friends?"

"I never forget my friends."

"Then have I ceased to be one of them?"

"How can you, Mrs. Kitty?" he remonstrated.

"Oh, well," she laughed, "I suppose I

must forgive you. But I thought you might like to see my cousin if you did not wish to see me."

"You know I am always glad to see you. But has your cousin arrived?"

"Yes, three days ago."

"And how does she like Dead Man's Flat?"

"Not much, poor child, I'm afraid. She's getting a little over her bashfulness, however, so I suppose she'll be a help to me in a week or so."

"She has not been accustomed to this sort of thing?"

"No. I don't believe she was ever in a public house before. A queer place to pull up at, isn't it?"

"Well, frankly, it is."

"Yes, I know it, and I'm sick of the whole business. But, hush — here she comes."

The glass door leading into the little

parlour opened, and a young girl, some twenty years of age, advanced with a shy movement to Kitty's side, her two big eyes sweeping the wide saloon with a charming diffidence. Her face was pale, but exquisitely fair and sweet; her hair, of a dull gold colour, fluttered in little wayward wisps about her ears and forehead. Very slender she was, her black dress accentuating her slimness, but the figure was rounded and full, and wore a nameless grace which was, some thought, her most distinguishing feature. To Vincent she seemed so entirely out of her element in this rough place, that, had an angel swooped down from the ceiling, he would not have felt more astonished.

"This your cousin?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes. Come here, Edith, and let me introduce you to an old friend. Mr. Vincent, this is my cousin, Miss Leslie."

"Delighted, I am sure," said Mr. Vincent, raising his soft felt hat, for he had not yet forgotten the ways of the civilised. The girl inclined her head very prettily, so prettily, indeed, that he involuntarily exclaimed within himself, "A lady, by Jove!" and he felt quite agitated at the presentation. Since he had abandoned the pen for the freedom of the bush and the gold-fields, he had not come in contact with too many ladies. Women, to be sure, abound everywhere, but one tires of them quicker, even, than one would of a rough male associate; whereas the refined woman is like the cut diamond — always beautiful. Kitty was a grand woman, upright and strong and beautifully symmetrical; but there was something too resolute in the poise of her head, too defiant in the brightness of her eyes, to make one think of her as most men like to think of women. There was antagonism

there, and fight, too, and that is precisely what man does not want in woman. She should have every attribute which he has not, and if nature has not endowed her with the most amiable qualities of her sex, it would be worth her while to cultivate them. Boadicea and Semiramis are as shadows beside Helen and Cleopatra.

The girl now raised her face to Vincent's and stole a look at him from out the corners of her great eyes, and he, seeing her really for the first time — for, hitherto, his eyes had wandered all over her person —exclaimed with a smile, "Why, Mrs. Logan, Miss Leslie and I are old friends."

"Old friends," repeated Kitty, "where then have you met before?"

"I have had the pleasure of meeting this lady twice. Do you remember, Miss Leslie?"

She looked at him and shook her head. "No, I can't say I do."

"Look at me again and think." His heart began a gentle pit-a-pat. "I was dressed differently in those days."

"I'm afraid you must think me awfully rude," she said, "but indeed I don't recollect you."

"Shall I aid your memory?"

"If you can."

"It was one hot summer's day, between two and three years ago. The scene was Brander's Ferry on the Yarra. You know it, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes—quite well." He marked the sudden flush that shot across her pale face, and his own stupid heart gave a louder pat-pat. Kitty watched them both with a strange earnestness.

"It was a very hot day," continued Vincent, "the wind blowing from the north. There were three people in the boat. Two young ladies and a young man."

"Where was the boatman?" asked Kitty.

"The young man didn't see him, but he has every reason to believe that he was there somewhere. There was also a dog with the party, but he, disdaining the boat, swam across. Half way over, a puff of wind blew the young man's hat into the stream, and had it not been for that dog, who nobly effected a rescue, it might have gone extremely ill with that hat."

"And you are he?" exclaimed the girl.

"Whom do you mean, the young man or the dog?"

"Oh, the dog, of course," said Kitty.

"I have not that honour," he said with a smile. "I am only the young man."

The girl turned her head aside and blushed still more, for she now remembered the incident quite well, and likewise recollected that both she and her companion had considered the young man's glances

particularly impertinent, and that they had laughed heartily at his mishap immediately upon landing.

"Quite interesting," said Kitty gravely, noting with a sudden twinge how well he recollected each little incident. "And where did you meet the second time?"

"Do you remember?" he asked the girl. In truth she thought she did, but she would not say so. It would be too absurd to suppose that she should remember him. The man must hold a considerable opinion of himself. In reply to his query she blushed and shook her head.

"It was about a month after our first meeting. You were crossing Flinders Street from the railway station; you had on a white dress and carried a sunshade all laces and frills."

"You are a close observer," said Kitty with a strange smile.

"Well," said he, "I merely wish to prove

that this lady and I are old friends. "You had such a sunshade, Miss Leslie?"

"Yes," she replied, "I believe I had."

"I have never forgotten it," he said.

"Nor its owner either?" suggested Kitty with an odd laugh.

"I could not possibly forget your cousin," replied the young man. And in spite of the fairness of her skin and the colour of her hair, there was a certain facial resemblance between the cousins which almost justified the remark. Kitty laughed again and walked to the other end of the bar. The young girl looked somewhat embarrassed, and let her eyes wander everywhere but to his face. He, however, looked up into hers with that boldness which is so common in men, and the more he looked the more he admired. She had changed but little, truly; yet her form had taken a fuller shape, and her face, pale and saddened by sorrow, bore a sweet womanliness which

the bright, girl face had lacked. Her neat black dress undoubtedly heightened the whiteness of her skin, but it likewise showed up to fullest advantage her wealth of rich hair, which shone like a mass of sunbeams about her face. Yes, thought Vincent as he gazed with enraptured eyes, this is a woman, a woman. And a new meaning of that wonderful word broke like an inspiration in upon him.

"How do you like Dead Man's Flat?" he asked.

The big eyes came round to him—two great grey-blue eyes, full of a sad, sweet light. She smiled in an odd sort of way, showing a row of neat little teeth behind her red lips.

"I am not quite accustomed to it yet," she replied.

"I doubt if you ever will be."

"Oh, I hope I shall."

"Do you?"

"Of course I do. Am I not here to make myself useful? I'm afraid I'm awfully stupid, though."

"I suppose you have never been in a bar before?"

"Oh, no," she exclaimed with a slight shudder. "I—I—that is, I—" she stopped, blushed, smiled, and then looked as though she would like to cry.

"Then you have never visited your cousin before?"

"No. She was brought up in the country and I in Melbourne. Neither have I seen her since she married—some five years ago. Is she not a beautiful woman?"

"Extremely so."

"She is such a grand, noble-looking creature. I always think she ought to be a queen—the sort of queens we read about, you know. I can picture her in fine gold-embroidered robes with a jewelled crown on her grand head. But, perhaps,

queens don't dress like that now-a-days, do they?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I've seen pictures of Queen Victoria, but I must confess she doesn't come quite up to the ideal."

"Then you are not English?"

"No. I have never been out of this country."

"Nor I, so you see we are a couple of benighted Australians who know absolutely nothing about queens."

"There are queens in all countries," he said gravely. "There are queens whose crowns are of living gold," he looked at her as he spoke, "whose sceptre is a glance, whose wish is law. They are the real queens of the earth; the others are mere paste-board images which men set up for their own benefit."

"Still those images receive a world of adoration, and, since it has become part of

their daily life, you may depend they believe it to be real. I often think I should like to go to Europe, but I know I never shall."

"How do you know that?"

"It is such a long way off."

"What is space in these days? We can send a message to London in less than half-an-hour; or a few weeks' voyage in one of the big mail ships will find you steaming up the River Thames."

"Yes, I know," she said. "And yet it would be all the same to me if it were only a few days' voyage."

"You would like to see London, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, and Rome and Venice and—But there—what's the good of wishing? I'm at Dead Man's Flat instead."

"Yes," he replied, "there is a difference."

At that moment Kitty came up, and calling the girl aside sent her away on some

errand. Then, turning to Vincent, said, "Well, what do you think of her?"

"She is a charming girl."

"Pretty, isn't she? Did you ever see such hair."

"Never."

"What do you think of her eyes?"

"Beautiful."

"Such is the general opinion."

"Then Dead Man's Flat is unanimous for once."

"Too unanimous. I think I did wrong in bringing her here."

"Well, I do not think it is altogether the place for one so——"

"I did not mean that," she said with a short, hard laugh. "I meant that she will put me in the shade."

"I hardly think so."

"Flatterer."

"You are too beautiful to fear any woman."

She flushed happily, but said, "You know you are talking nonsense."

"Perhaps so, but I only say what I think. You at least know that I think you the handsomest woman I have ever seen."

"That is why you have kept away fo three whole days?"

"Precisely."

She looked hard at him. "Precisely?"

"Was it not better that I should?"

"Of course. I was only joking. We made a couple of fools of ourselves, and were ashamed to meet each other, eh? But don't stay away so long again, or I may suspect that you really did mean something."

Her eyes went into his and she tried to smile, but her beautiful mouth quivered with unmistakable pain. He saw it all and read by the guilty beating of his own pulses the anguish she endured. Thinking, however, that it were better she understood

him once for all, he said with a forced laugh, "You know, Mrs. Kitty, it was very weak and foolish of me, but I couldn't help it, I really couldn't help it. I believe I would have kissed your cook, Bridget, under similar circumstances."

She flushed a deep, dark red, and if he had watched her hands he would have seen them opening and shutting convulsively. Her breast strained at the covering which confined it, and she made several attempts to speak before she seemed to find the power of utterance. Then she laughed a low, strange, excited laugh; a laugh full of passionate restraint, of disdain, reproach—of a thousand and one things, it seemed to him. He shrank back from her, feeling too despicable to look into her flashing eyes.

"You are complimentary, George, very. Bridget ought to feel flattered. I'm sure I do."

"You are cruel, Mrs. Kitty."

"Cruel!" she echoed, as though she wondered he could use the word.

"You know well enough what I mean."

"I am glad I do, for it is painfully evident you do not know yourself." And with a saucy laugh she quitted him and turned to a group of her admirers at the other end of the bar.

George took his glass over to one of the numerous small tables, sat down and filled his pipe, sitting, it so happened, facing the glass door through which Miss Leslie had disappeared. Now and again he looked towards Kitty and found her eyes upon him, but it was strange how many curious patterns he discovered in the curtains which adorned that little glass door, and how remarkably interesting he found them all. Of course he wasn't looking for the fair cousin—he would have told you so himself; but even at the expiration of an

hour he was loth to quit his study of those patterns. At last, feeling quite ashamed of himself, though he knew not why he should, he arose and bade Kitty good-night.

"Have you been looking at a ghost?" she asked.

"A ghost—why?"

"Because you have sat there for nearly an hour staring as though you had seen a spirit."

"Perhaps I have," he said.

"I should advise you to go home and have a good night's rest."

"Thank you, Mrs. Kitty, I will. Good-night."

"Good-night." For a moment her hot palm lingered in his, her wild eyes searching his face for something which she could not find. Then he turned and departed.

Once outside, with the clear sky above him and the night air blowing fresh on his

heated face, he heaved a great sigh of relief and tried hard to think of anything but the "Emu's Head" and its occupants; but try as he would he could not rid himself of the presence of two great eyes, eyes which danced before him like stars, which stole into his soul, illumining his whole being. But they were not those of Kitty.

CHAPTER V.

A NEW EXPERIENCE.

The next night the town knew him not, and it must be confessed that more than one person at the "Emu's Head" felt just a little disappointed. Had they known how Mr. Vincent had disappointed himself, they might have gained some consolation from that knowledge, but, being in ignorance, naturally imputed his absence to indifference. George, however, was far from being indifferent, and if the truth were told, it might be said that he had grown fearful of himself. Those great grey eyes had haunted him all through that night, and in the morning he felt that it would not be wise to look too closely into them yet awhile; and so he set about his daily

toil with the fixed determination not to make a fool of himself, though it must be confessed he still thought too much of those eyes to take any keen pleasure in the hunt for gold. But the great temptation came when the evening drew in. His mate Phil, after tidying himself, proposed that they should walk as far as the township. No, he didn't think he would; then he thought he might, and then he wasn't quite sure; and not till the impatient Phil told him to hurry up, as he wanted to get back that night, did George finally reject the proposal. But all through the tedious hours his thoughts were over there in the bar of the "Emu's Head," and he spent a strangely uninteresting night in consequence.

When he awoke next morning his mind and heart had decided to work in unison, and that same evening, arrayed in his best attire, he presented himself at the popular

rendezvous. Again he was successful in his endeavours to enter into conversation with Miss Leslie, and he looked longer into those wonderful eyes than was absolutely good for him. That night he walked home in a whirl, and had no idea that a mile was such a short distance.

The next three nights he passed in much the same way, and four consecutive appearances being so unusual an event with him, Kitty could not help broaching the subject.

"You have grown very fond of the town all at once," she said.

"Oh," replied Mr. Smith, who happened to overhear her, "towns get attractive sometimes, Mrs. Logan."

"I didn't ask for your opinion," she answered sharply.

"Oh, didn't you?" said that worthy with a leer. "I thought you did."

Kitty turned on him with a very angry look, though what she might have said,

for she thoroughly detested her husband's friend, was luckily suppressed by the sudden appearance of her cousin. Mr. Smith, however, winked in a remarkably knowing manner towards the young girl, and then slouched off. Kitty looked from George to the girl, then back again. An ugly shade crossed her handsome face, and leaning forward to him, she said in a low, intense voice, "What is this, George?"

"Hush—nothing. Don't put such an idea into the girl's head."

But that was the least happy night he had ever spent there. The girl, truly, was as charming as before, but whenever he looked from her face his eyes *would* wander to Kitty, and he saw her brow contracted like a thunder-cloud.

The next night he kept away from the place, but on the following day, which happened to be a Sunday, he was fortunate enough to meet Miss Leslie walking, and

begged that he might be allowed to accompany her—a request which she unhesitatingly granted.

"I have been wanting to see the diggings ever since I came here," she said. "My cousin promised to take me on Sunday, but some people came and we had to put it off. To-day she is not feeling well, and as I had no one to take me I had to come alone."

"Then I may hope our meeting is not inopportune?"

"Oh, no. It is pleasant to have for a guide one who knows the place so well."

"I think I may lay claim to that amount of knowledge," he laughed. "Come, and I'll show you all there is to be seen."

They walked on together past groups of miners, who, dressed in their Sunday clothes, with their faces properly washed, sat or lounged smoking or chatting, for on the Sabbath a holy calm pervaded even the gold-fields: among countless canvas tents,

over the hospital and police barracks, and then descended lower down the creek among the workings. He rocked a cradle for her, explained its use, and showed how the gold was caught and shaken to the bottom of the slide. And she, never having seen the like before, pronounced it all very wonderful, and asked a hundred simple questions in her own sweet way.

"But where is your claim, Mr. Vincent? You have not shown me it yet."

"Come this way, then. Oh, please, do be careful!" as she slipped forward with a little scream. "Will you take my hand? This road is not quite so safe as a church."

She laughed, and said she did not suppose it was; then slipped her tiny, neatly-gloved hand into his great brown paw. But it was surprising how safe she felt once that big hand had closed with a gentle firmness on her own; and he—well, he wondered what little warm thing he had

nestling in his palm which made him feel such a hero. And he wondered also why he should tremble all over and feel such a blockhead when he tried to speak, and why a dozen attempts to say something interesting died soundless on his lips.

"Here we are," he said, as they stopped before a hole about ten feet deep. "Phil (that's my mate), Phil and I worked it out yesterday, and to-morrow we go further down the creek."

She looked into it, and seeing nothing unusual about it, asked him if he had found much gold.

"No—only about an ounce."

"I suppose some of the men are very lucky?"

"Indeed, yes, though there are many more with no luck at all. The men in that claim there," pointing to the one next to his, "found one nugget weighing over twenty ounces. The men here," pointing to a

claim the other side, "only got three pennyweights. It is all a matter of luck."

"You are not lucky, then?"

"I must not complain," he said.

"Do you like mining?"

"Well," he replied, "there is nothing in it to like—except when you strike a good patch. Otherwise it's a rough, dirty, disagreeable business. Yet, do you know, I always fancy I'm much more of a man now than I was while I was quill-driving in Melbourne."

"You were in an office there?"

"Yes, with Bash and Crumpet, big soft-goods people in Flinders Lane. Old Bash was one of those prayer-meeting fellows—a teetotaller, and everything that was hypocritical. He used to prophesy that I would go to the—dogs, and you see he has come pretty close to it."

"But you will not remain a digger—surely?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Afraid?"

"Well, you see, the fact of the matter is—I'm haunted. Don't start—it's not a very grisly spectre. I am haunted by the ghost of a goose-quill, and I firmly believe that I shall—in spite of my strenuous endeavours to elude such a fate—I firmly believe that I shall end my days as a clerk."

She laughed lightly. "Would that be such a terrible fate? Would it be as bad as this? You would at least be able to associate with ladies and gentlemen."

"I own that would be a great inducement," he said. "Yet, you must not think because we are rough in our ways and dress that we are all as depraved as our surroundings. There are, I assure you, plenty of gentlemen here among us. The men who found that twenty-ounce nugget yesterday were a clergyman and a lawyer.

A queer pair to mate, eh? I worked myself for two weeks with a barrister when I first came here; but he jawed and drank instead of working, so I had to give him best. And, do you know, the fellow who has the very next tent to mine, Billy Green, we call him, is an English Honourable, which means, I believe, that he is the son of a lord."

"And does he live in one of those little canvas tents?"

"Rather, and uses a pick and shovel like a navvy, and cooks his own dinner, too; and, for a 'new chum,' doesn't shape half badly at it, either."

"And do you cook your meals?"

"I have to—unless I can coax old Phil into taking my turn."

"Surely you cannot like such a life as this?"

"No, I do not; but I was brought up at the desk, and I hated it—or, rather, I

was brought up with pretty big ideas. My father was very rich at one time, and he was a man who lived richly, if you understand what I mean. The result was that he came a smash."

"A smash?"

"He turned bankrupt, but, unfortunately, had not secured his future before so doing. I was taken from school and hurried into an office, and I've hated the sight of a pen ever since."

They turned, as he spoke, from the uneven ground and entered the main road, their faces set for the town.

"Perhaps you would not hate it so much now."

"Perhaps not. But I have hopes that I shall make my fortune here." She smiled. "You smile," he continued, "you would say that is the hope of every man on the diggings. No doubt it is; but my chance is better than theirs.

I will tell you of it some day—if you will let me ?"

His voice involuntarily softened, and he looked down into her eyes. She dropped them to the ground and murmured that she would be delighted; but it seemed to him that her step imperceptibly quickened. Anxious to re-assure her he fell back on the old stock question, "How do you like Dead Man's Flat ?" Only he asked her if it had improved on acquaintance.

"Oh, yes," she replied, slightly embarrassed, "at least I think so. I am getting a little more used to it now. It did seem strange at first, but then, you know, I'm a town-bred girl and know absolutely nothing of the country."

"Nor are you likely to know much of it through a residence here. These people are no more of the country than we. They are the more reckless of the townsmen, the adventurers of the nineteenth century. Do

you intend making a long stay with Mrs. Logan?"

"As long as she will have me."

"As long as she will have you?" he repeated.

"I have no other friend in the world," she said in a low, choking voice, "at least, no one to whom I would care to go."

"I am deeply sorry for you."

She looked up into his eyes, her own filling with tears. "Thank you," she said.

"Won't you—would you deem it an impertinence if I were to ask you to tell me something about yourself?" He floundered so sincerely through this little speech that she could not be angry; besides, she was in no mood for anger.

"I have nothing to tell," she replied frankly, "at least that would interest a stranger."

"Am I a stranger?"

"Of course you are," she answered with a smile.

"And yet I have known you for three years. You are very unkind, Miss Leslie."

She smiled. "Three years? You mean a week."

"Pardon me, but I mean exactly what I say. I have known you since we met that day on the Yarra. And besides, Kit—Mrs. Logan, told me about you before you came, though, of course, I had no idea who you would prove to be."

"Did she tell you why I was coming?"

"She said that you had lost your mother, and that she was the only relative you had."

"Yes, one might almost say that. When I wrote to her that mother was dead, she replied with a most beautiful letter imploring me to come to her. She is as generous as she is beautiful, Mr. Vincent, and I know I shall love her dearly when we get to understand each other better."

"Did you see much of her before you came here?" We are afraid Mr. Vincent was asking a lot of unnecessary questions, but to him it was such a great delight to hear her low sweet voice that he would fain have had her talk for ever.

"No," she replied. "Father did not care for my aunt's husband, and Kitty was brought up in the country. I only saw her when she came to Melbourne on a visit. But I'm sure this tattle cannot interest you."

"It does, immensely. Are her father and mother alive?"

"Her father is. He—he—" she blushed and looked a little confused, "he keeps an hotel at Ballarat."

"It was there she met Logan, was it not?"

"Yes." She answered his questions as though she seemed to think he had a right to put them, nor once deemed that they might possibly be an impertinence.

"Do you like him?"

"That is hardly a fair question."

"No, it is not. Besides, you could not possibly like him."

"You are good friends, are you not?"

"No—that is, I don't know that we are bad friends."

"He thinks most highly of you at all events. Even that dreadful Mr. Smith confesses that you are——No, I won't tell you. It might make you vain."

"It's exceedingly kind of Mr. Smith, and I'm very much obliged to him. I'm only sorry that I cannot return the compliment."

"You do not like him then?"

"Candidly, no. But here we are at the town." He stopped and held out his hand as he spoke.

"Thank you so much," she exclaimed impulsively. "I have never enjoyed an excursion more." Then, thinking he might possibly misconstrue her words, she

murmured, blushing as she looked away, that she thought the diggings a most interesting sight. Vincent entirely concurred with her and asked her if she thought she would be walking that way next Sunday afternoon. Still looking away she replied that she did not know, and when they parted both felt an indescribable fluttering all over.

When the girl entered the private sitting-room of the "Emu's Head," she discovered her cousin Kitty at tea, and as a cup of that cheerful beverage is a thing no woman (more particularly in Australia) is likely to refuse, especially after an afternoon walk, she sat down at the table and proceeded to make sad havoc among the cakes and bread and butter.

"Well," said Kitty, after watching her for some time with amazement, "where have you been, dear?"

"Over the camp."

"The camp—by yourself?"

"I started by myself, but I luckily met Mr. Vincent."

"Oh!"

"And he was kind enough to show me everything."

"Was he? Do you think him a good-looking man, Edith?"

"Very," said the girl, earnestly, though her mouth was full of bread and butter. "And then he is a gentleman, Kitty, and treats one as though——" She stopped suddenly and looked up into her cousin's face as though half afraid of what she had said.

"As though one were not a barmaid?" said Kitty, in a sudden, hard tone.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the girl, a pained look sweeping her pale face.

"You should never flatter yourself, my dear, because a man is civil to you. They think because we are publicans that

we are all sinners of the deepest dye, and they begin with flattery. They will tell you that you are more beautiful than a goddess, that your eyes are stars, your lips sweeter than honey. They will fling their gold-dust at your feet, too, if they think it will pay them. Nothing for nothing is their motto, and if they say otherwise they lie, girl, lie always." She started to her feet as she delivered these words, her face flushed a deep, dull red, her eyes ablaze with uncontrollable anger. "Let them say what they like," she continued as she paced up and down, "let them grovel, and trample on them as they lie before you, but don't believe them, that's all."

"But I have heard nothing that I should not believe," faltered the girl, who was really terrified at her cousin's inexplicable wrath.

"Then he didn't make love to you, eh?"

"Oh, Kitty, how can you?" cried the girl. "You know I would not allow such a thing."

"My dear child, I suppose you are a woman and have a woman's feelings? You are pretty, you must know that. Do you think men are blind? Then you are a barmaid." There was something cruel in the way she repeated that last word.

The girl shuddered. Yes, she was a barmaid. She had not thought she was, but, after all, what else was she? She received no wages, truly, but she worked for her living nevertheless; drew beer and opened bottles, and heard words which made her ears tingle. But she liked to think that she had not altogether lost caste —that she was still a lady. It stung her to be told that she was nothing but a barmaid; that all the men who treated her with such deference were laughing at her all the time; that she was, most probably,

regarded as one who had sought the bar to allure; that she might be bought with gold dust—if the bag were big enough. The hot blood rushed to her face, turning it to a vivid crimson.

"If what you say is true," she said, and her eyes sparkled with shame and indignation, "I will be a barmaid no longer."

"I said nothing. Besides, what am I that I should abuse my own trade? I only know what they think; and why should you imagine that you will be an exception to the rule? Unfortunately for you, you are merely a woman like the rest of us. To-morrow it will be all over the place that you and Mr. Vincent were seen together."

"But is that wrong?"

"My dear, this is a very uncharitable world, and you cannot be too careful. But Mr. Vincent, I think, is rather a good young man. He, of course, would treat you as a lady, and for your own reputation

would not suggest that you should explore the camp with him again?"

Now this being precisely what Mr. Vincent had suggested, Edith hung down her head, the tell-tale blood dyeing even the roots of her hair.

"He did ask me if I would be going that way again, but I'm sure, oh, I'm sure he never meant any wrong by it."

Kitty laughed a hard, ringing laugh. "Possibly, possibly. But have I not told you this is a very uncharitable world—especially to such as we?"

"Such as we!" repeated the girl in wonder. "Surely, surely you are jesting?"

"Perhaps I am. There, there, kiss me. You know I am your guardian now, and must protect you. Don't, pray don't think any more about it."

The girl held up her face and Kitty caught her in her arms. Looking long and steadily into Edith's delicate features she

exclaimed, as if speaking to herself: "Yes, you are a lovely thing, a beautiful girl-flower. There, there, child," she said as she kissed her, "go to your room and forget all about it."

When the door closed behind the girl, Kitty sprang to the mirror which hung above the mantelpiece and studied her face intently. But after the soft girl-face of her cousin it looked hard—and a woman's. Even her beautiful mouth had dropped about the corners, giving it a firm, an iron look; but, most horrible of all, the skin about her eyes was puffed and puckered. It was the first time she had ever caught a line on that smooth skin. With a passionate gesture and a heart-broken cry, she turned from the unflattering reflection.

"*My God, I'm wrinkled!*"

CHAPTER VI.

INTROSPECTION.

After the preceding interview with her cousin, Edith went straight to her room and was seen no more that night, neither did Kitty come to her. The next morning, however, she sought out that wilful queen and told her that after what had passed between them on the previous evening she would find a further attendance at the bar incompatible with her dignity, but that she would, by various household duties, try hard to compensate for her non-appearance in public. If, on the other hand, she was likely to prove an encumbrance, she begged to be allowed to depart, for she doubted not but that the education she had received would ensure her a livelihood.

"Let you go," cried Kitty, taking her in her arms, for, like all impulsive beings, she was as tender as the dove in her milder moments, "let you go, indeed. Never! And don't take any notice of what I say about the people here. I despise them more than you do. I've got an evil temper, Edie dear, and when it's on me I'm sure I'm not responsible for my words or deeds. The fact of the matter is I'm a disappointed, soured old woman."

"Old woman!" repeated the girl with a smile. The idea of this handsome creature, in all the glory of her first young-womanhood, applying to herself such uncharitable epithets as "old" and "sour" seemed extremely ludicrous.

"Yes, my dear, old and wrinkled."

"Old and wrinkled — you! Oh, Kitty, you are the most beautiful woman in the world"

There was such evident sincerity in the

girl's tone that a momentary flush of happiness overspread the smiling Kitty's face, and she looked a truly noble creature —as stately and grand as a dream-woman.

"They used to tell me so," she said, "but that was before I was wrinkled, before I made a wreck of my life. It's all one now though, isn't it? Yet I would give all my beauty—beauty!" she echoed passionately, "what has it done for me? I would give it all, Edie dear, for half-a-dozen of your soft ways."

"Oh, I am only a poor girl," replied Edith, looking up into her cousin's hot eyes, "you are a glorious woman, Kitty, grand and stately and noble."

"No — not noble," she said hastily. "You must not entertain such a foolish idea. I am proud and passionate, perhaps, but my pride and passion are anything but noble. I tell you I fear myself at times, because I know I have so much evil in me.

If anyone did me a great wrong I would never forgive them—no, not if they went down on their knees and bathed my feet with tears. Is that noble? If you want further proof of the nobility of my soul," she said, with a hard laugh, "look at my —husband." It was with a palpable effort the word slipped from her lips.

"I am sure you wrong yourself," replied the girl, twining her arms round Kitty's neck. "You are noble, dear, and I shall continue to think so in spite of you."

Kitty smiled sadly. "May you always think so, dear."

"And you will let me love you, won't you?" asked the girl, drawing her cousin's proud mouth down to her own.

"God bless you, yes. Love me all you can—I need it."

And the girl wondered at the two great burning drops which fell on her upturned face.

But she went near the bar no more, and in the discharge of her household duties soon regained that cheerfulness of mien which is so natural to the young. She and Kitty were the fondest of friends for the next week, and she grew more convinced each day that the one grand, noble woman in the world was her own large-hearted cousin. During the whole of this week she had not once seen Mr. Vincent, and, for some absurd reason, no doubt, refrained from asking of him; and, by a singular coincidence, Kitty never broached the subject either. Yet it was not the lack of thinking of him which held Miss Edith's tongue. On the contrary, she had thought a great deal of that amiable young man. In the first place he had treated her with the utmost courtesy, and that in itself is a thing which must, or should, command a woman's sympathy, more especially when her lot is cast in strange places. Had she been a princess

he could not have been more deferential, more considerate, and it was therefore only natural that he should have gone up a step or two in her estimation. Then, in the second place, he was so different from all the other men whom she had met at the bar of the "Emu's Head"; so much more respectful—so much more gentlemanlike. Moreover, he was serious, and she liked serious men. Flippancy was a stranger to him; what he said or did he seemed to mean; he was thoroughly earnest. He had not told her that her eyes were stars, but she knew that he found something very attractive in their glow, and that he had watched her face, not as the vulgar sensualist, but with a deeper meaning, with a thinking look which went behind the skin. And then—yes, why should she deny it?—he was decidedly handsome. And what a fine strong figure he had; and didn't his big hard hand seem made for one's own to

nestle in—for the protection of a weak little woman? And hadn't he a soft, low voice which captured one's confidence in a moment? And then—only to think of it!—he had actually remembered that absurd meeting in the ferry-boat, and —yes—she believed she had not quite forgotten it herself. And then she blushed and ran and looked at herself in the glass, and blushed the more at her own confusion.

But if Mr. George Vincent had not been fortunate enough to obtain an interview with, or a sight of, Miss Leslie, it was not for the want of trying. He had put in an appearance at the "Emu's Head" every evening since that Sunday on which he had escorted Edith over the diggings, but to his infinite regret he caught not even a glimpse of her. This surprised him much, and he puzzled himself exceedingly in trying to comprehend her sudden and mysterious

disappearance, but, as Kitty vouchsafed no voluntary explanation, he refrained from encroaching upon what he rightly or wrongly considered a delicate subject. Why he should have done so he might have been too modest to explain, even had you asked him, but that he did so is indisputable, and for three whole nights he curbed his curiosity. It is true Kitty was the same, and she was never so sweet and womanly as when face to face with him. He almost wished it were otherwise—not that he admired her less, but that he respected her more. On the fourth night, however, his curiosity triumphed over his discretion, and he asked what had become of the fair cousin.

"Why," said Kitty, "do you mean to say you don't know?"

"She's not gone?" he asked hurriedly.

Kitty's mouth quivered strangely.

"What if she has?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing, of course. But it was very sudden, wasn't it?"

"No, she has not gone," said Kitty slowly.

"Where is she then?"

"Would you very much like to know?"

"Well, I don't see that it really matters much," he answered indifferently. "I had missed her you know, and naturally inquired."

Logan's wife looked at him as though she would read his inmost thoughts, and from the indifference of his mien gathered no little satisfaction.

"She is rather a strange girl, George, a proud one too in her own soft way. She objects to the bar."

"I thought it would not suit her," he said bluntly.

"Do you know, George, that is rather cruel of you?"

"My dear Mrs. Kitty, have I not said the same to you a hundred times?"

"It is nothing for me. I have been used to it. My father put me behind our own bar when I was fifteen——"

"Then he ought to be downright ashamed of himself," said the young man hotly.

"So you must make allowances for my shortcomings."

"I do not admit them, Mrs. Kitty. You are a brave, sweet woman, whose heart is as generous as your face is beautiful."

Poor Kitty's eyes sparkled with delight, but the next moment she turned from him, a shade having come across them. These were sweet words, and such as were bound to gladden a woman's ear, but the heart could not accept them so joyfully, nor the brain forget their inspiration. He had told her she was beautiful, truly, but his tone was such as a man might use while eulogising a picture, a statue. Reverence, appreciation, great admiration for a surprising work—all were in his looks and tones, but

they were the looks and tones of one who admired the masterpiece, the poise of the statue's head, the curl of her beautiful lip, and being anything but a statue she resented this placid adoration. Through her blue veins coursed a blood as hot as fire, and in her heart was the heat of a furnace. This respectful homage, therefore, was not calculated to cool her fierce nature. One might liken it to a handful of dust thrown upon red-hot coals. Of a sudden the glow is dimmed, but the next moment the dust itself is consumed and the fire starts up afresh with sullen vigour. So was it with her, and she would turn away and try to smother the fire within, try as only a woman who feels strongly can; but it would break forth again, more lurid for the momentary suppression. Bound to one whom she most cordially detested, and *now* more than ever, she had conceived an affection for Vincent more blind than the night, more burning

and impetuous than the wind which the great parched-up northlands drive down to the southern ocean. It is said that we all love once in a lifetime, but whether it shall be for good or ill comes not within the prophecy. Her love was certainly born in bitterness, and might pass away into the gloom of night. Nay, it would; for out of such a love what could there come but death?—not death of the body only, nay, not that at all, but of the heart. Sometimes she did not care, at others she wrung her hands with anguish and called on heaven to save her from herself—a piece of human folly at which the devil laughs till his sides ache. Each day she formed a thousand noble resolutions. She would cover her anguish with a smile and vow to preserve herself even against herself; but she could not see him approach without her tell-tale heart driving the blood to her face, nor listen to his low voice, nor look into his

eyes, without feeling that one word from him would draw her soul from her.

For days, for weeks she led this wretched life, going about in her old defiant way with the unseen anguish in her breast; but all the same it was none the less terrible to bear, more terrible, perhaps, because it should not be. And yet it might so easily have been hallowed—sanctified by God and man. Had they only met in the long ago. . . . And so he came and went, evincing his admiration by many a little act and pretty speech — trifles which the poor woman hugged to her breast as though they had been jewels of inestimable value. Then came the episode in the passage, when, in a moment of frenzy, he forgot all and took her in his arms. For a moment she was unconscious, lost in a maddening whirl of indescribable joy. She felt his lips press hers, his heart beat against her heart, his strong arms press her till she gasped for

breath. And then a cloud passed before the face of the moon and the darkness of death fell upon her world.

He had not meant it; he was sorry; would she forgive him? Oh, what a bitter mockery were these words! but she was a woman, and she must smile—and hope. Hope! For what had she to hope? At the best, dishonour—at the worst, neglect. And at the end of the road was the eternal into which she must plunge at last. And with it all, another fear had come—one against which the anguish of the past was as the morning mist which the sun dissolves into a memory. We may not possess the crown, but so that no rival gain it we are content to wait and hope; moreover, to us it always seems worthy of gracing a monarch's temples, however insignificant it may appear to the rest of the world. And it is her mind we are endeavouring to picture; translating, as it were, her brain-

scenes into words. It is not what others thought of Vincent that we stay to tell, but of how he appeared to and affected her. When we open our morning paper and read that Mary Smith has committed suicide because John Brown has taken on with Jenny Jones, we forget that the deceitful John, though he be only a clerk in a coal office, has seemed to poor Mary as good a man as ever won a young girl's heart. How many are there, who contemptuously murmur "fool" as they scan the sad story, would have given such a humble being as Brown a second thought? Yet she could die for him. Of course we know that she was only a respectable grocer's daughter, but she could not have been more of a woman had she been a queen. This, unquestionably, is a fearful reflection on the great ones of the earth—and I am often inclined to doubt that they are merely men and women, but think they must be masquerad-

ing gods!—yet, as far as we know, the capacity to love and hate is strewn broadcast by indiscriminate nature, and each little individual builds up a world of his own irrespective of the millions which buzz about him. Into this world of Kitty's we have been trying to peep.

That she was jealous she would not confess, but that her nerves were agitated to a singular degree she did not endeavour to conceal. Fiery, impetuous, she had jumped at a conclusion as only women will, and had tortured herself bitterly in consequence. And all the while here was the innocent cause of her suffering hanging like a flower to her neck and entreating to be allowed to love her. Poor Kitty had her weaknesses like all flesh, but she had also the most excellent qualities; and when she looked down in her cousin's soft eyes and kissed her full on the mouth, she would have sacrificed her life for honour or duty.

Take her with the impulse strong upon her and you might fashion her into an angel or a fury, for, as we have said, she was a creature of impulse, and as such blew hot and cold. Yet she was well-meaning, and always tried hard to do the right thing, but her passions swayed her at will like the wind the breast of the ocean. She tried to forget that she had ever regarded Edith as a rival, and yet she welcomed with joy the suggestion that the girl should quit the bar. She had had a stormy scene with her husband, in which he denounced any such intention on Edith's part, declaring she was one of the attractions of the place; but Kitty turned on him like a whirlwind, and from that moment he never broached the subject again.

"I thought she'd have put a bullet through me, Sam," he said, as he related to Mr. Smith the incident. "Such a she-devil never was bred."

"Well, Peter, old pal," replied his companion, with a slightly mocking accent, "I never thought it would come to this—never, upon my soul. You—*you* bullied by a woman!"

"Curse her," cried Logan, his fat cheeks quivering with passion, "I'll give her something one of these days that will make her wish she had never been born."

"Always see what use you can make of a thing before you chuck it away," said Mr. Smith meaningly.

"Well, Sammy, what do you think?"

The two gentlemen looked exceedingly knowing as they winked at each other across their tumblers.

CHAPTER VII.

I LOVE YOU.

Mr. George Vincent, though extremely gratified to hear of Edith's refusal to any longer play the rôle of Hebe to the gods of Dead Man's Flat, was not in the least surprised at the information. Indeed, it seemed only natural to him that she who had been reared in a refined atmosphere should find the saloon of the "Emu's Head" anything but congenial to her tastes. Even the best regulated bars enjoy a freedom which is peculiar to themselves, and it may therefore easily be imagined that on some occasions, with such a reckless community, the "Emu's Head" was not an abode in which a delicately nurtured and naturally refined woman would feel at home. He had wondered much what her thoughts of the place

really were; he had even tried to pump her, as we have seen. That she had expressed neither approval nor disapproval was no surprise to him; and yet he wondered if by any chance she could have found entertainment in such a position. Now, however, he violently upbraided himself for such a thought. He was glad he was not mistaken in her. She was what she seemed, and the place would know her no more. He felt a proud man as he walked home that night, though he honoured the town no more that week.

When the Sunday came round, however, he dressed himself in his smartest clothes, gave his Sunday boots an extra polish, and sailed forth as spruce as any dandy who had ever trod the diggings. We have grown so accustomed to poke fun at ladies and their elaborate toilets, that we seem to overlook the fact that men are just as vain, and that though they have neither the grace

nor beauty of the dearer creatures, they have an equal, perhaps a surpassing, presumption. Truly he has not those guardians of the mysteries—those frills and laces and flounces which tantalise one so—or masses of jewelled hair, or—or—but we need not attempt to describe the thousand and one charms which cling to woman like a part of her; but if you were to see Captain the Honourable Clarence Fitzputty dress for the Duchess of Ditchwater's little dance, you would ever after hold your tongue about the vanity of the sex. George was not an honourable, neither was he a guardsman, neither did he dress for the Duchess of Ditchwater; but he who thinks pride is the sole prerogative of the rich and great (which it ought to be), labours under a strange delusion. There are moments in the most wretched of lives when the lord of creation asserts itself, and man, spreading his imaginary tail, becomes—a peacock.

Poor George wandered up and down the camp all that day, his eyes continually scanning the road, but the wished-for object never loomed in sight. He, however, would not abandon all hope till the last, and not until the evening drew in did he turn dejectedly towards his tent. To say the least of it, he was mightily disappointed. He quite believed that she would come, and feeling that he himself would have gone a thousand miles to meet her, he failed to understand why she had not been animated with somewhat similar desires. Then he assailed himself with a torrent of rude epithets, such as lout, fool, and others of a more pronounced character, and taking up the slice of mirror which did duty for a looking-glass, he carefully scrutinised his features one by one, the glass not being sufficiently comprehensive to take in the whole of his countenance at once. With a scowl on his face and a sigh in his throat, he

turned from the unsatisfactory reflection. Of course she wouldn't come; he knew it all along. How could such a girl look at a digger—a fellow who worked like a galley slave, and not always as cleanly. Bah! He was old enough to know better.

After having made a can of tea, he flung himself on his bunk, lit his pipe, and began to smoke hard. But presently the loneliness became intolerable, as it will to bachelors—at times. He felt that he needed a little companionship, and wished that even his mate Phil were with him so that they might talk, intellectually or otherwise. But Phil was one of those genial souls who loved above all things the glasses and the lasses, and every Saturday night he wended his way to the town with his week's earnings, and was seen no more till the Monday morning, when he trudged back to work, empty in pocket, and sick in mind and body. He was usually very morose all that

day, partly through shame, though more with anger, and would speak no word unless spoken to; and when his day's work was over he would immediately seek his bunk, and sleep dead on till the next morning. Then the man awoke once more, and he would declare that he hoped the next drop of liquor he touched would choke him. But by Wednesday he was invariably free from all such morbid ideas, and when the Saturday came round again he would slink off to the town with the usual result.

But Vincent, in the meantime, having grown tired of his uncongenial self, put his hat on and sallied forth, thinking a walk in the cool air of the evening would wake him up a bit. And so, unwittingly, of course, he approached the town, and ere he was quite aware of his exact locality, he found himself entering its main street. For a moment he stood undecided; then argued

thus within himself.—Since he had got thus far, he thought he might go in and give Kitty the time of the day, drink a glass with old Logan, and hear more about Ben Hall's wonderful plant and the sticking-up of the Mount Marong Escort. That Hall had planted a treasure he doubted not, and that the cipher he held was the key to the situation George firmly believed. That both Logan and Smith knew more of this business than they pretended he likewise thought probable, but there was no way of making sure of his suspicions without disclosing his own secret. He now carried the paper about with him in his belt, aad had pored over it for many a long hour. Words he arranged with comparative ease, but he had not discovered the system which made the whole perfectly intelligible. Moreover, this was a secret which must be kept as dark as night, for not alone was it one which would excite the cupidity of many a prowling

wretch, but the Government, should it come to its knowledge, would step in and most probably seize the whole. Now the Government is a tyrant whom we obey upon compulsion, and consequently we have not always that respect for it which it should command. If we can evade a tax, or smuggle through the Customs a box of cigars, we deem it devilish clever, by gad! and what is more, lose no tithe of our reputation for honesty. Therefore it is very probable that Mr. George Vincent, although he had not the slightest intention of taking the powers that be into his confidence, believed himself to be fully as honest as his neighbours, and we shall have to take him at his own valuation; for, after all, who should be better able to value a man than the man himself?

It was quite dark when he approached the "Emu's Head," but being a familiar and always welcome guest, he went to the

side door, and opened it without knocking. Inside, the hall lamp was not yet alight, but stumbling along he made for the little private parlour, where the host and his more intimate friends usually drank and smoked. As he approached the door he beheld Logan fast asleep in his chair, a bottle of whisky and a glass beside him. In his fat fingers he held a half-burnt cigar. A more horrid picture of vulgar sottishness Vincent thought he had never seen, and away his mind rushed to the grand, proud woman, who so perversely had linked herself to such a man.

He was about to awaken the sleeper when he saw the fat stomach rise and fall excitedly, and heard a strange sound escape the man's lips. His eyes were immediately transferred to the landlord's face, and to his astonishment he beheld the latter's eyes wide open. At first George was considerably taken aback, but, regaining his composure,

was preparing to smile a cheerful greeting, when the man lifted his left hand and shook its three fingers impressively.

"I'll tell you what it is, Sammy," drawled the sleeper, and though he stared hard at Vincent, he made no sign of recognition, "that young fellow has got the paper, and we must get it somehow. I tell you, Ben buried the gold here at Dead Man's Flat, and it was old Billy himself who told me." The fat hand clenched itself as though to lend a further emphasis to the words, then sank slowly to the man's side; the muscles relaxed, the eyes closed, the sleeper's breath became more regular. Vincent stole from the door, quivering with a new excitement. What he had just now heard was like the confirmation of his own hopes. The cipher had suggested to him the words—*Dead Man's Flat.*

He made his way quietly along the passage to its further end, for from the parlour

there, which was known as the ladies' room, he had heard the sound of voices. On approaching, those voices grew more distinct, and he recognised the speakers as Edith and Mr. Smith. He thought this strange, he hardly knew why. Perhaps, because there was a certain tone, a ring, in their speech, which sounded stranger still, and which made him hesitate to enter boldly, for a horrible thought rushed in upon him—He might not be welcome! Advancing to the door, which was partly open, he peeped through and saw, for there was a lamp burning on the table, Mr. Smith with outstretched arms, while before him, her face in her hands, stood Edith. Vincent's first fierce impulse was to rush in and seize the scoundrel, but his better sense mastered the strong desire. The man could not possibly harm her while he was by—and he should see. See what? He blushed long after at the very thought.

"Just one," said Mr. Smith, coaxingly; "just one, my pretty."

"How dare you?" cried the girl, looking up at him with a white, terrified face. "How dare you?"

"Just one, my pretty," repeated the man. "It won't take any of their colour, you know, and the next chap that comes along 'll never know I've been there before him. I've had my eye on you ever since you came, pretty, and I love you—there!" He emphasised this momentous declaration with due importance.

The girl flushed crimson, then turned deathly white.

"Let me pass," she gasped, "let me pass."

"Give me one first—only one." He made a step towards her, his arms still extended.

"Stand back," she cried. "How dare you? Ah!" This exclamation was caused

by the sudden appearance of Vincent in the doorway. Seeing the situation was rapidly developing an undesirable climax, he advanced with a savage bound. Seizing Smith by the collar, he swung him so violently backwards that that good man came with a fearful crash to the floor.

"You infernal scoundrel," cried the young fellow hotly, as he stood with clenched hands over the prostrate form, "if you ever molest this lady again, I'll break every bone in your infernal body. Now go, go—quick, or I may be tempted to kick you." And as he raised his foot, as though to put the thought into execution, Mr. Smith crawled rapidly into the passage and disappeared without a word.

"I'm afraid the brute alarmed you," said George, advancing to the girl, whose eyes swam with tears, and whose breast rose and fell tumultuously. "But pray compose yourself—you are quite safe now."

"Oh thank you, thank you," she sobbed.

"Don't cry, Miss Leslie," said he, feeling a queer sensation in his own throat. "He has gone, and will not dare to approach you again. If he does, I'll——" What he was going to say would not, perhaps, be difficult to guess; but at that moment she, giving a great sob, staggered forward, and he, rushing to her assistance, left the sentence unfinished.

"You are ill?" he asked anxiously. "Has the scoundrel hurt you in any way?"

"No, no. But the shame of it, oh! the shame of it!" She buried her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

"I understand," he said. "The man is a scoundrel, and I will have him watched. You will pardon me, Miss Leslie, but is this the—the first time?" he asked shyly.

"No," she replied, with a shudder.

"Does Logan know?"

"Yes, I am sure he does."

"And Kitty—Mrs. Logan?" he added, quickly correcting himself.

"No, she does not know. She would not permit it; but——"

"But this is no place for you."

"You do not think I am ungrateful?" she asked, looking up through her tears.

"I am sure you are not. But have you no one else to whom you could go?"

"No one to whom I would go," she answered quickly. "But I am fairly well educated, and could teach—I must teach. I could never live this dreadful life, Mr. Vincent. It would kill me."

George looked down at her where she sat, her slender form bowed with anguish, her breast rising and falling as though every breath she drew came with a painful effort. The choking sensation returned to his own throat, and for a moment he trembled like the little woman before him. Then a great

wave of love and pity swept suddenly in upon his soul. His brain reeled. He saw nothing, knew nothing, but her presence. In a moment he was on his knees beside her, and had taken her little white hand in a passionate grip.

"Miss Leslie—Edith, will you give me permission to protect you?"

She looked down into his earnest face, her great eyes starting at the thrilling question.

"What do you mean?" she muttered faintly.

"Will you be my wife?"

"Your wife?"

"Yes, my wife. I will protect you as you should be protected. I love you, dear, I love you."

He sought to take her hands, but she repulsed him gently.

"You are sorry for me," she said in a low, broken-hearted voice. "You pity me. It is good of you and I thank you."

"I am sorry," he said, as he returned her earnest look with a fervour which compelled her to drop her lashes, "and I pity you with all my heart. But I love you before all things, and if you will trust me I will try to make you happy. Don't think because I am an outcast now that I have always been, or shall always be, one. I am not rich, dearest, but I am young and strong. I will work for you, I will give you a life's devotion."

"I should not value a man for his fortune," she said, looking frankly into his eyes, "but I—" and then she stopped and began to blush and tremble so that it was with the greatest effort he restrained himself from taking her in his arms.

"You are not engaged?" was his eager query. "You are not mar——?"

"No—no!"

"Then you do not care for me?" he asked despondently.

She looked down on him, a strange and wonderful light shining in her great eyes. He needed no other word of encouragement. In a moment his arms went round her waist and his lips met hers.

"Edith, Edith!" he cried passionately, as though he could find no other words.

"Dearest," she whispered softly. Then she put her arms round his neck, and drawing his face to her kissed him of her own free will, thereby setting the seal upon their love.

And they sat long thus, for he would not rise from her feet, saying one always looked up to heaven; and she blushed and looked as happy as though she had never a care in the world. Then they talked long of the future, and told each other of their hopes and fears, while he even hinted vaguely of the mysterious cipher, though as yet he dared not give expression to all his hopes. Yet, vague as were his whispers,

she took many pretty oaths to secrecy, and vowed to curb her woman's curiosity till such time as her lord should be pleased to speak; and he, kissing her white hand, swore by the Holy Trinity that he loved her better than his own soul; and through their bodies the blood coursed joyously, and in their eyes was the light of heaven.

"You will live on here for a little while longer," he said, "and in the meantime I will see what can be done. Kity loves you dearly; she will guard you carefully."

"Yes, yes—but *she* must not know."

Vincent hung down his head. He did not ask her why. There are some questions which should never be put.

"No," he said, "we will keep it a secret till everything is ready."

"That will scarcely be necessary now, George."

He bounded angrily to his feet and Edith uttered a little scream. These young

people had been imprudent enough to make love without first shutting the door, and upon turning their eyes in that direction they beheld Kitty standing on the threshold, a mocking smile upon her beautiful face.

"You, Mrs. Logan!" exclaimed the young man.

"Yes George, I. Why didn't you shut the door, you stupid boy?"

"I—I never thought of it," he said sheepishly.

"I suppose not. But what am I to understand from this situation?" she asked in a strange, quivering voice.

"That we love each other, Mrs. Kitty."

"Love!" she echoed harshly, "are—are you sure?"

"Quite," he said.

"And you, Edie?"

The girl flung herself on her cousin's breast and sobbed aloud.

"There, there, child," said Kitty, an indescribable quiver making her voice sound wonderfully sad, "don't give way like that. Love, surely, is a thing of joy? But perhaps you cry because you are so happy? May you know no other tears." Then leading the girl gently to the door she said, "Go to your room now, Edie dear. I am your guardian, you know, and have something to say to Mr. Vincent."

And so the girl went, and when the door had closed upon her, Kitty and George stood face to face.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ROBBERY.

It would be difficult to describe the various emotions which thrilled the breasts of these two young people as they stood confronting each other. Love, envy, respect, fear—a formidable host—each one striving for supremacy. On her lips was a strange smile, in her eyes a new fire, on her brow the dark shadow of a storm.

"Well, George," she said, her proud lips curling and quivering strangely as she spoke, "it has come to this, eh?"

"To what, Mrs. Logan?" he replied, looking exceedingly foolish and feeling deeply embarrassed.

"Mrs. Logan!" she repeated.

"Mrs. Kitty, then. Do you mean that I have been making love to Edith?"

"That is what I mean," she said. "Tell me what you mean."

"I believe I have found my happiness at last, Mrs. Kitty. I mean to marry her."

"Then you do love her?"

"Dearly—very dearly."

"Are you—are you sure of this, George?"

"If I know my own heart," he said.

"And she—?"

"Has promised to be my wife. Strange how things come about, isn't it? When I met her that day on the Yarra she set every pulse in my body throbbing, and now—"

"And now?" she cried.

"And now we are to become man and wife. Oh, Mrs. Kitty, when I think of it all, I can find no words to describe my happiness."

His listener gave a great sob. "Have you no pity?" she moaned, "have you no pity?"

"Pity," he echoed. "I don't quite under—— Good heavens, you are ill?" He sprang forward as he spoke, for she had turned deathly pale and staggered back a step or two as though about to fall.

"No," she gasped, "I am not ill—I—Oh, my God, my God!" and dropping in a chair she buried her face in her hands and sobbed as though her heart would break.

Seeing how he had blundered, he sprang to her, and laying a hand gently upon her shoulder said, being deeply moved, "Come, come, Kitty, you must not give way like this—indeed you must not. We have always been the truest and best of friends; let us——" But she had seized his hand and was covering it with tears and kisses.

"You must not do that," he said, with-

drawing it quickly, "indeed you must not do that."

"No," she cried, starting to her feet, "I am not a dog. Why should I? Oh," she exclaimed turning to him with eyes that shone like fire through tears, "why am I not a man so that I could forget like men?"

"Kitty," he said, "you are wrong. I do not forget—I never shall. Why should we not still be friends?"

"Friends," she echoed almost fiercely, "what have I to do with friendship?—what have you? Yet it is as well we understand each other. Only, George, you should think twice before you break a woman's heart."

"Kitty," he cried, "on my soul I could not wrong you. In a moment of madness I forgot myself, forgot that you could not —should not be mine. You are lovely, and, God knows, I am no saint. I loved you better than I thought."

"Pray don't excuse yourself," she said coldly, the weak woman transforming herself by a touch into one of commendable dignity; "it is quite unnecessary. If I had been tottering on the verge of an abyss, I am exceedingly grateful to you for having so heroically saved me. Yet if for one moment you imagined that I was in danger, Mr. Vincent, I must confess to you that your fears were entirely groundless. Even a woman may look over a precipice without turning giddy; and a publican may not necessarily be abandoned."

"You know you wrong me," he exclaimed. "You are very cruel."

Her proud lip curled scornfully. "My dear George," she said, "we have evidently been labouring under some preposterous delusion. I think, with your permission, we will forget all about it." And with a slight inclination of her defiant head she quitted the room.

Vincent, left alone, began to pace up and down excitedly. He was both bewildered and annoyed at the strange turn things had taken. That Kitty liked him he knew well, but that her affection had taken such deep root he had never possessed sufficient assurance to imagine. Then, too, her sudden change of front had startled him not a little. One minute she was in tears, the next, as cold and cutting as only a passionate woman can be when she calls in scorn and dignity to her aid. He could see her lip curl yet, hear her sharp, clear tones, and watch the fire smouldering in her eyes. He had expected a blazing forth; but she was proud in her own impetuous way, and strove hard to veil the grief which was so painfully apparent. How he cursed the folly which had urged him to that madman's act! His pretty speeches and his compliments had hitherto been valued at their worth. She knew he liked her, that

he, in fact, admired her greatly, but never till that fatal moment had he given her cause to imagine that he ever hoped to become anything nearer than a friend.

He turned from the room with a feeling of impending calamity upon him. The door of the little parlour was wide open as he passed, and he beheld Logan sitting in the self-same chair—indeed it seemed as though he had not stirred—his glass before him, a cigar in his mouth.

"Come in, Vincent," he cried, as George stepped into the doorway; "come in and have a glass."

"Thank you, I will." The young fellow entered and helped himself to some whisky and water, feeling he needed a little stimulant. The landlord surveyed him through his strange little eyes with a look of singular penetration.

"Why don't you sit down, man? One would think you had the rickets."

They say it is a common failing of the inebriate to see his own weakness in others. Certain it is that Mr. Peter Logan fidgeted so excessively himself that he might be excused for imagining that everyone else had suddenly developed an exceeding love for St. Vitus.

"It's rather later than I thought," replied the young man. "I must be off."

"Phil won't be home yet, will he?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Then what's your hurry? Has the young lady gone to bed?"

"I'm sure I don't know. It was Mrs. Logan to whom I was speaking last."

"Mrs. Logan," he laughed. "Oh, I thought it was someone else." He winked knowingly, screwing up his fat cheeks in a disgusting manner as he did so.

George felt as though he would like to give him a good shaking, but concealing his contempt, he said, "I may as well

tell you, Logan, so that you'll understand the reason of my future visits to this house. I am going to marry Miss Leslie."

"Oh, are you? Sudden, isn't it?"

"It was decided upon this evening."

"You've done pretty well."

"Yes. You won't object to my coming here, I suppose?"

"My dear boy," said Mr. Logan effusively, "you shall come here as often as you like. You shall stay here if you would like to. Yes, that's a good idea. Why not come and live here?"

"I think it would be too far from the camp."

"A mile," said Mr. Logan contemptuously; "what's that for a man of your build? When I was down to fifteen stone I could easily do my mile inside the quarter of an hour."

"I can quite believe you; but I'm afraid

I cannot entertain the thought at present," and he turned to go.

"What a confounded hurry you're in," exclaimed the landlord irritably. "Why don't you sit down, man, and have a chat?"

"No, thank you all the same. I must be getting along."

"Why," said Logan, with an excited laugh, "one would think you had a wife waiting for you—not that all wives are dying of love for their husbands. Take my seraph as an example. She's got so high and mighty, so full of heavenly things, that she won't condescend to look towards the earth—at least, not towards this portion of it," he added, patting his manly bosom.

Vincent did not wonder at it, but he laughed in a queer sort of way. However, thinking the subject a rather delicate one, he refrained from expressing an opinion;

bade the aggrieved husband a hurried good-night, and quitted the house.

Through the long, straggling street he passed, his mind filled with a world of strange sensations. Now it was of Edith he thought, of the sweet moments which had sped into hours almost before he was aware of their existence; of Kitty and her sudden transition from tears to scorn, and of what the result of all this strange business might be. Then, too, he thought much of the words which had issued so distinctly from the sleeping Logan's lips, and his hand went instinctively to his side where he carried the bushranger's cipher. He must work hard at this now, doubly hard, for there could be no longer any doubt of its being the key to Hall's Plant; and, moreover, there was another who had agreed to share his life, and for her sake he must do well. Filled with this exhilarating thought he pressed rapidly forward,

and about half-way between the camp and the town he beheld the figure of a man dart suddenly from the road and disappear behind some stunted bushes which grew by the wayside. With a quick movement Vincent uncased his revolver—for those were perilous times, and a man knew not at what moment he might be called upon to defend himself to the death—and with his finger on the trigger, and eyes and ears alert, he marched on. He was no coward, but he breathed a sigh of relief when he had passed the bushes in safety, having felt sure that the man had disappeared only the better to attack him. He little guessed that he was the last person in the world whom that individual would have cared to meet.

At last he reached his tent, and unbuckling the flap which answered the purpose of a door, stepped within. That his mate Phil had not yet returned, the

padlocked screen bore ample witness, and, heaving a sigh at the thought of that man's folly, he proceeded to strike a light. But while looking round in the darkness, he thought he saw the moonbeams enter through a crack in the canvas, and never having noticed such a flaw before, he struck the light with the intention of examining it. No sooner had the candle burnt up, however, than he uttered a great exclamation, for the tent was in a state of the wildest disorder. Over the floor, on the little table, and across the two bunks which he and Phil occupied, were scattered, in the most admired confusion, the whole contents of their two trunks—the trunks themselves, their locks wrenched asunder, were tossed, one in the other, in one corner. George stared for several moments at the wreckage around him with a look of amazement, then held the candle over where he had observed the streak of moonlight, and

saw that a great hole had been slit in the canvas. Through this the robber had entered, and it, being at the back of the tent, had enabled him to enter and leave without encountering any chance observer.

Vincent sat down on his bunk, lit his pipe, and for fully half-an-hour sat smoking and staring moodily at the confusion, turning the thing over and over in his brain, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Plunder, undoubtedly, must have been the object of this outrage, and yet it astonished him not a little to see so many useful articles of apparel lying about, apparently forgotten. A fastidious burglar, truly; one for whom the yellow dust only possessed any power of attraction. That no ordinary rogues had been at work the neglected clothing bore sufficient testimony; and of a sudden a new, overwhelming thought rushed in upon the young man. His mind reverted to the words which Logan had muttered

in his sleep. With a cry, he sprang from his bed and began to gather up the scattered wardrobe. He found it complete in every detail—handkerchiefs, socks, collars, ties—everything was there but his papers.

"By Jove!" he cried, "it is as I thought. It's not the gold they have been after, but Hall's cipher."

And indeed it looked like it, for not, as well as he could recollect, was there one article of apparel missing, though a large portfolio in which he kept his mother's letters and sundry other papers, which were of no consequence to anyone but himself, was missing. Three little bags of gold-dust, which he had had in his box for some time, were also gone; but that fact occasioned no surprise. It is not likely that a thief will disdain gold, however much he may prefer paper. But the loss of the gold troubled Vincent little.

If it had only been an ordinary theft, if the gold alone had been taken, he would have considered the success of the enterprise due to his own negligence, and would have vowed sundry oaths never to be thus caught napping again; but when he saw so many useful things lying about, thought of the disappearance of his papers and the great secret which he held, he could not believe the motive of the crime was anything but the gaining possession of that secret. Then he undid the belt which spanned his waist and from one of its little pouches withdrew the mystic cipher, even unfolding it to make sure that it was the real thing. He then bethought him of making another copy in case this one should be lost, but that intention was no sooner conceived than abandoned, for it would not do to have two copies of this precious paper in existence. He had intended doing a similar thing long ago, but he now saw how wise he had been

in refraining from his first impulse. Had he carried out that thought the secret would now be in the possession of another—perhaps a dozen others, a dozen desperate men. His position would then have been an unenviable one, for it was a thousand to one they would have put him out of the way to save future trouble. Even as it was his security was none too good, for that he was suspected of being in possession of the secret there could no longer be any doubt. Then he began to think of all whom he knew on the diggings, of what he had said at different times; and he felt sorry that he had ever made any public statement in reference to the murder in Little Lonsdale Street. He remembered the peculiar looks of the landlord and Mr. Smith, and recollected well each incident of the subsequent interview when Mr. Logan told of the sticking-up of the Mount Marong Escort, told of it, too, in an aggrieved and

personal tone. He had not thought much of it then, truly, and latterly a more tender subject had filled his heart and mind; but in the face of the present outrage, and with the recollection of the sleeping Logan's words still ringing in his ears, he could not disconnect the "Emu's Head" with this most impudent robbery. Who were Logan and Smith? He started as he asked himself the question, but rejected, as being too utterly foolish, the thought to which it gave birth. No; a girl like Kitty would have known all about him before she had trusted her life to his keeping. But who was this man Smith? Might he not be the associate of all the cut-throats in the camp? Nay, why shouldn't he have been one of Hall's gang? He had it—or at least he thought he had. Hall had stuck-up the Mount Marong Escort at Dead Man's Flat. Now that escort carried between six and seven thousand ounces of gold, which, roughly speaking,

would weigh nearly six hundred pounds—no insignificant weight. Consequently Hall, not being altogether a fool, and knowing that it would be impossible to travel with such a treasure, especially with men as wild and lawless as himself, decided to bury it. Therefore he must have buried it somewhere on or near Dead Man's Flat. Indeed, had not George himself found those three words, though how he had done so he could not for the life of him recollect. Was not this then one excellent reason for explaining Smith's presence? He had come there in the hope of finding the treasure. And yet this was but a poor explanation, for every man in the place had come with somewhat similar hopes. He, however, put the paper carefully back in his belt, thinking that he would take the first opportunity of studying it as he had never studied anything before, and then began to set the tent ship-shape.

While engaged in this unpleasant occupation he was startled by the sudden entrance of his mate, Phil Thomas. That worthy gentleman lurched into the little room as though he had been suddenly ejected from a catapult.

"Hold up," cried Vincent, whom Mr. Phil, as he lurched towards his bed, stumbled against with much violence; "what the devil do you mean by knocking me about?"

"Beg pardon, mate. I guess I've got a drop too much aboard of me." And, indeed, he looked as though he had, for not alone was he stupidly drunk, but he looked emaciated and wretchedly ill.

"The same old game," said Vincent with a sarcastic laugh. "I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself."

"I am, mate," replied the man angrily. "I'm a dorg, that's what I am. But if I ever go near that cursed town again, I hope I'll drop down dead on the way."

Vincent laughed incredulously. "My dear Phil, how often have you sworn ten times more fearful oaths than that? The fact of the matter is, you're not man enough to drop the liquor."

"Ain't I though?" was the reply. "You'll see if I ain't this time."

"Well, it's quite time you dropped it, for it has done us a bad turn now."

"How a bad turn, mate?"

"Are you so drunk that you can't see? Somebody's broken into the tent."

"Broken in, mate?" echoed Phil, looking down on Vincent with big stupid eyes. "Where was you, then?"

"Over at Logan's. When I came back I found the place turned topsy-turvy. They made a slit in the canvas there, and wrenched the boxes open with a pick."

Phil was off his bunk in a moment, the news seeming to have knocked him sober.

Diving his hand into a certain corner of his trunk, he uttered a great cry.

"It's gone, by Gord!"

"What's that?"

"I had a little bag of the dust there, mate. It was for her—the old woman—for her and the little 'un."

"Good heavens, man, do you mean to say you have a wife and child?"

"I have," replied the man, bowing his head with shame. "Gord forgive me."

"So say I, for you need it. I always knew you were a fool, Phil, but I never thought you were as bad as this."

"No, I suppose not," replied the man with a strange, excited laugh, "but you see I am. A dorg that wants kicking is a better man than me. I couldn't stop my boozing, not me, even though they was kicked out into the street. And only the other day," he went on mournfully, "I got a letter written in the little 'un's own

hand, Gord bless her—you ought to see her, mate ; she's a flower-kid, that's what she is—and in this letter she said that she prayed night and morning for her dear father ; that's me, mate, me! And there was a little P.S. at the bottom in the old woman's hand——But I can't, no," he cried, clapping his hands to his eyes, "I can't. She was always like an angel; she didn't upbraid me, mate, because—because I had always been such a good husband to her! But, you see, their landlord had threatened to turn them into the street." The man seemed to bring forth this sentence with a violent effort—as though the words were choking him. Then, pressing his face in his hands, he sobbed aloud.

Vincent regarded him for several moments without speaking. Then he said, "I suppose you have nothing now?"

"Nothing, mate. I'm broke."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Gord knows," said Phil, sinking dejectedly on his rifled box. "I can do nothing."

"What do you think of yourself?"

"Don't ask me, mate. Let me forget, if I can, or I may go and blow my brains out. Poor Polly," he moaned, "poor little 'un! I wonder what you'll do."

"Look here," said Vincent, unable to torture the poor fellow any longer, "I've had three bags of my own stolen, but I've got a little left—up there at the house." He jerked his hand towards the police barracks as he spoke. "Now, you've been a good mate to me, Phil, and have never, as far as I was concerned, gone back on your word. I want you to give me that word now and I'll help you."

"It's yours," said the man. "What is it?"

George looked steadily into his pale, serious face. He saw the man was in earnest.

"It's this, Phil. I'll lend you the equivalent of your loss, if you'll send it at once to your wife, and keep away from the drink for a month. If after that time you go back to it—we part company."

Phil bounded to his feet with outstretched hand.

"It's life you've given me, mate. My word is yours—you'll see that I can keep it. I make no more promises, because a man breaks them as easily as he does an egg-shell. There's my hand, mate; take it! Gord bless you!"

And Vincent never had cause to regret that bargain.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RESULT.

We will now retrace our steps to that portion of the road whereon George Vincent saw the figure of a man disappear behind the bushes; and after watching that figure crouch low among the leaves till even Vincent's footsteps could no longer be heard, we shall, if we watch closely, see it stealthily rise, and take once more to the main road, its face turned to the town. Three times it goes through this little performance before it reaches the main street, and, curiously enough, always to avoid some belated pedestrians. Once in the town, however, it stalks boldly enough till it pulls up at the private door of the "Emu's Head." Here it produces a key from its pocket,

quickly unlocks the door and, unobserved, enters. It makes directly for the little sitting-room in which we saw Vincent bid Mr. Logan good-night. The fat landlord is still there, his glass before him, his cigar, at which he pulls somewhat excitedly, still in his mouth. As his visitor enters he looks up and recognises Mr. Smith.

"Back, Sammy? I was getting a bit nervous about you. I kept him here as long as I could, but I'm hanged if he didn't seem to sniff the business."

Sammy shut and carefully locked the door.

"Pre—cautionary measures," he smiled.

"Well?" said Logan eagerly.

"If you don't mind I'll take a little of this first." Mr. Smith helped himself to a stiff nobbler of whisky and water.

"Well?" said Mr. Logan once more, only this time a trifle more eagerly.

"Can't say as it is or not," replied Mr.

Smith facetiously; "but I've been there, Peter, old pal, and I found these bits of bags in my pockets when I left." As he spoke he produced four little bags of gold-dust.

"Nothing else stick to you, Sammy?" enquired the eager landlord with a knowing leer.

"Yes, I believe it did. Now I wonder what it could have been? Oh, I know!" With a merry twinkle in his evil little eyes he put his hand up under his waistcoat and drew down a black portfolio, rather the worse for wear.

"Ah," said Logan, "that looks good. But first let us see that it's not in here." And untying the little bags he pushed his fat fingers through the precious dust. "No," he said, after examining the four of them, "there's nothing here. It must be in the book. Hand it over, Sammy."

Mr. Smith did as he was bidden, taking

up a position by his companion's side. With fat nervous fingers the estimable Logan untied the portfolio, and carefully extracted paper after paper. These he and his confederate scanned closely in every conceivable way, but to their unutterable disgust they found them to consist of letters and other papers totally unconnected with the object for which they searched.

"Curse it!" growled Mr. Smith, bringing his fist down on the table with a bang. "I'm blest if I ain't gone and risked all this for nothing."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Logan soothingly. "Let us try once more, Sammy, let us go through 'em all again." This they did, only to experience another rebuff. Then the worthy landlord took out his knife and carefully cut the lining from the leather, but succeeded in bringing no secret to light.

"It's no go," groaned Mr. Smith despondently, "it's not there. I don't believe he's got it neither, and what's more, I don't believe old Billy ever give it to him."

"Don't you be an ass," said Mr. Logan disdainfully. "Billy gave it to him right enough, though what he has done with it is more than I can say. Anyway, Sammy, old pal, we've got to find it, don't you see? You're sure you brought all the papers you could lay your hands on?"

"What did I go for?" asked Mr. Smith scornfully, as though the very suggestion that he could not carry out so mean an undertaking were nothing less than an impertinence. "I tell you I opened both their boxes, and what's more, I searched their clothes as well."

"Then," said the landlord, "if he has not lost it he must carry it on him. In his waist-belt most like."

"Most like," repeated Mr. Smith dolefully. That worthy man seemed terribly cut up at the sad and provoking turn of affairs.

The landlord took a long pull at his tumbler, his little eyes apparently staring into space. He was thinking. His companion looked on, wondering what stupendous thought was building itself up in that brain. Suddenly Logan spoke.

"I have it, Sammy."

"Where?"

"No—not that. I mean I have an idea. We must get Mr. Vincent's belt."

"Any fool could think of that," replied Mr. Smith contemptuously. "What I want to know is, how are we going to do it? Not that I've any love for him—" and Mr. Smith came out with a choice collection of very remarkable, if not superfine, epithets.

"No violence, Sammy. Remember, I'm a respectable married man—now, and I

can't have my good name mixed up with anything that is not distinctly proper." Mr. Logan looked so exceedingly comical as he spoke that the worthy Smith grinned till his moustachios curled up to his little eyes.

"That's just it, Peter," said he, still grinning furiously, "you're married, old pal; that's just it."

"Just what?" said Logan sharply, not liking the peculiar tone which his companion took. "What the devil are you driving at?"

"I mean a wife is useful, sometimes, Peter, old pal."

Logan uttered a terrible oath. The man Smith was too horribly insinuating even for his coarse soul.

"Come," he said savagely, "out with it. No humbug. What do you mean?"

"I mean what I'm tellin' you, Peter. If you wasn't so fat and lazy you'd have seen

it yourself long ago. She's dead-nuts on that young chap."

"The jade," hissed Logan, his fat cheeks drawing in in a puzzling manner, "I wonder if she is! The hussy! No wonder she's no wife to me."

"It's very hard on you, Peter, old pal," replied his companion with a sympathetic grin. "But that's the way of women. They don't think nothing of chucking their lawful spouses."

"But he's in love with the cousin—with Edith," said Logan, having no wish to discuss so delicate a subject with such an indelicate companion.

"So much the better," replied Mr. Smith with one of his exquisite leers. "Nothing like working with women, Jimmy—I beg your pardon, Peter—they're so sly, so devilish cunning, old pal. And when you can get 'em jealous—outrage their feelin's, as they call it—they'll stick at nothing.

I've heard you say the missis wouldn't think twice of putting a bullet through a man. She'll suit us down to the ground."

"So you think you'll work with her, Sammy, eh? You'd like to catch yourself, wouldn't you? You don't know that she's the most obstinate, wilful hussy that was ever born."

Mr. Smith smiled in his own peculiar way. "If she was the mother of Satan," he said, "she'd do it."

"Well," said Logan, "there's no harm in trying; and you always was pretty cunning —snaky-like—wasn't you?"

"Look here," said Mr. Smith, his black eyes gleaming angrily, "I don't see the necessity for any personal compliments. We either sail in company or stand off on our own account. Whichever you like, Peter, old pal."

"Don't you get quite so touchy, Mr. Smith, or I might be telling you that I've

kept you long enough. But that's not my style, and you know it. The man who has once been my friend is always my friend."

Mr. Smith laughed softly, or rather hissed softly, for his laugh partook more of the nature of a hiss than of any other human sound. He thought of sundry little incidents in Mr. Logan's life which would considerably alter the complexion of this statement. But he also knew the nature of the man, and feared his savage Irish blood. The genial landlord's brow contracted, his little eyes sank back till they shone like two beads surrounded by ridges of flesh. Mr. Smith had seen that look before. It was the black cloud which precedes the thunder and lightning. He thought it time to seek shelter.

"Well, Peter," said he apologetically, "I've done all I can, old pal; but as we can do nothing more to-night, I propose that we toddle off to bed and sleep on it."

So they drank another whisky and water, burnt the portfolio and its contents, and betook themselves to their respective chambers.

And while all this was going on in the little room below, Edith slept, in her little room upstairs, in Elysium. At first she was surprised at the non-appearance of her cousin Kitty, for that young lady had been her bed-fellow since the second night of her arrival, but as her own heart was too full of a strange new gladness, her own brain too pre-occupied with her own sweet, exciting thoughts, she soon forgot such a trifling matter as Kitty's absence and dropped off, as we have said, into Elysium. When she opened her eyes in the morning it was to gaze on the dingy room with its dingy wall-paper, but she never knew till that moment how very artistic the pattern of that dingy wall-paper really was; and when she

opened her window and saw the sun rising like a blood-red ball through the morning haze, she thought the young day had never seemed so fresh. Her own pulses quickened, her body throbbed with the awakening day. She went hither and thither on the wings of a butterfly. She wondered if this were really the Dead Man's Flat of yesterday.

Kitty did not show up that morning. Complaining of a bad headache she requested that she might not be disturbed on any account, a request, however, with which Edith might not have closely complied, had not Mr. Logan informed her at breakfast that he was about to go abroad on some important business, and that he should esteem it a great favour if she would mind the bar till he returned, or Kitty appeared. This seemed to her such a reasonable request that she could not very well refuse, so in spite of her prejudice to the profes-

sion she once more mounted guard over the beer-taps. It happened, however, that her post was not found trying in the least, for, beyond attending to the wants of a few habitual drunkards, there was little to do in the bar of a morning, all the men being hard at work down the creek.

About half-past twelve George came in, but being a privileged customer he entered the bar parlour through the private door. He then rang the bell like one who wishes to be served, and Edith, entering hastily, found herself immediately encompassed by a pair of strong arms. The situation, however, was one not calculated to cause her much consternation, and in the brief intervals which he allowed her lips he gathered that she was wonderfully happy, that she had not repented of her promise, that she had not seen Mr. Smith that day, and that she was afraid of no one now.

"I wish I could say the same," said he.

"But why are you here, darling? I thought it was understood that you were not to serve in the bar?"

"So it is; but Kitty is ill this morning and Mr. Logan has gone out on business. He said there was no else in the house whom he could trust. Do you mind very much?"

"I do not like it, dear, but under such circumstances I suppose you could not very well refuse. However, you must object to it at night. Remember, darling, you are not alone in the world now."

"Ah, no," she said, clinging fondly to him, "I am not, thank God, and you don't know how brave it makes me feel. I wouldn't mind serving in any capacity now, for I'm sure I shouldn't feel degraded."

"No honest work should be degrading, my dear," he said softly, for her simple words had touched him deeply, breathing as they did such loving trust in him;

"though society has decreed that certain forms of labour shall be unsuited to all whom it calls ladies and gentlemen. Now, I am singular enough to despise all such laws when applied to me, but when applied to my wife that is to be, I heartily endorse them." And he kissed her in the same spirit.

A wonderful thing this kissing. How much it may mean—or how little. Lip meets lip, and henceforth the world is inhabited by two persons only. Or he may kiss with false lips and her heart shall wither; or she may nestle in his arms, press her hot lips to his and steal his soul and bring him lower than the brutes. Or it may mean as much as the idle breeze which kisses the leaves of yonder tree—which is nothing. Yet even then it will grow to something—perhaps a hurricane—which is the offspring of the breeze. When the lips meet the eyes burn into each other like

two suns. Yes, decidedly, the breeze will presently scorch like a simoom.

"You believe," she said, "in the old saying, that a man who has been once a gentleman always remains so, but you are not prepared to admit that the argument will hold good with women?"

"Am I not?" he replied laughingly. "And pray who told you so? But I see, young lady, we are going to have some passages at arms by-and-by. Very well, Mrs. Vincent that is to be, I shall let you know all about that when I have once conducted you across the draw-bridge of my castle."

"Have you many dungeons in that castle, George?" she laughed.

"Have I not? Deep down, a thousand feet below the moat, ha! ha!"

But here she slipped away from him to serve a noisy customer and his castle vanished into beer-bubbles.

Returning to his side (it is wonderful how these young people like to get their hands on each other), she asked rather suddenly what he had meant a little while ago by the suggestion that he was afraid of some one?

"Ah, yes," he exclaimed, "I had forgotten. You fill my brain so full that I have not room for another thought. It was this, dear: my tent was broken into last night, four bags of gold dust stolen and all my papers." And he told her how it had come about. "I have been to the police," he continued, "but they can hold out little hope — there are so many evil characters here, you know. No one was seen prowling about the tent, and, so far, the occurrence is shrouded in mystery."

"Mystery, indeed. Poor George, to lose all that gold."

"One bag belonged to Phil, and I am sorry, for his sake, that the robbers got

away so easily. It, however, is not the loss of the gold which troubles me, but the disappearance of my papers."

"Were they very valuable?"

"Not worth sixpence."

She looked at him in a puzzled sort of way.

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

"My dear," he said, dropping his voice and looking stealthily out into the bar, "the papers have no monetary value, for they are only my mother's letters, a few receipts and addresses; but I have a paper in my possession, Edith, which I believe to be worth twenty-five thousand pounds."

"George!" she cried, as though she could not grasp the thought of such a stupendous sum.

"Hush!—not quite so loud. It is my secret, the secret of which I hinted to you the other day. On it I base my hopes of that fortune of which I spoke. It is in

the form of a cipher, and was given to me by a man whom I once saved from some assassins in Melbourne—I will tell you the whole story one day. You have heard of Hall, the bush-ranger, have you not?"

"Yes, often since I have been here."

"Then you have heard how he stuck-up the Mount Marong Escort, and how he stole between six and seven thousand ounces of gold?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Logan often speaks of it."

"Does he? Well, that paper of which I speak will, I believe, if deciphered correctly, enable me to find that treasure. Now no one knows for certain that I have this paper, but I am inclined to think that there are one or two who suspect as much."

"Then it was to gain possession of it that they committed the robbery?"

"That is my firm belief, else why should

they have carried off every scrap of paper on which they could lay their hands? An ordinary thief would not be bothered with such a lot of useless stuff, which might easily lead to his identification."

"Do you suspect any one?"

"There are two men, dear, on whom I look with anything but favour. I must watch them well."

"You will be careful, George?"

"Trust me."

"But this cipher, dear; is it so very difficult?"

"I have found it so, though I have not really gone into it. It seems scarcely possible that a man like Hall could have invented a mathematical problem which would puzzle a Newton; therefore I think it will be simple enough, once we strike the right key, and I shall wonder then how I ever came to think it difficult."

"I should very much like to see it."

"So you shall. But, hush!—here comes Logan." The landlord's voice was at that moment heard outside in the passage. "Remember, Edith. Not a word to a living soul."

"Not a whisper."

She held up her face and he kissed her quickly, but not quickly enough to escape the sudden entrance of Mr. Logan.

"Ha, ha!" laughed that worthy man good-humouredly, "is that the way you do it, eh? Ha, ha!" he continued, rather unpleasantly, "go it while you're young, my dears, go it while you're young, for the night cometh when no man can work." Edith blushed furiously and darted into the bar, while Vincent, resenting such flippancy, was about to make some sharp retort when the merry Boniface exclaimed, in a voice of great concern, "By the way, George, what's this about the robbery at your place?"

"How did you know there was a robbery?" asked Vincent sharply.

"I've just been down the creek and saw your mate, Phil. Pretty serious, eh?"

"I think so."

"It's not pleasant," said Mr. Logan sympathetically.

"No, it is not. But the next man who comes fossicking round my diggings, without my permission, will go off with a lump of lead in him — if he goes off at all," added the young man savagely.

"I call it a thick slice of hard luck," said Mr. Logan in the same sympathetic tone. "Phil tells me they bolted with your papers too. What on earth could they want with them?" This was thrown out in the form of a suggestion, but it received a very unsatisfactory reply.

"I don't know — unless they thought I might have had some bank-notes among the papers."

"Have you a clue of any kind?" enquired the landlord, taking off his coat and rolling up his shirt-sleeves.

"None whatever. But I've turned the police on."

"Ah, we have a sad mob of blackguards on the Flat," mused Mr. Logan, lighting a big cigar.

"You're right, we have. The police believe that one or two of Hall's gang are here." This was a chance-shot, a fabrication, in fact, but it made the worthy Logan start and swallow a mouthful of smoke.

"Is that so?" he said.

"You won't let it go any further, Peter?"

"Not me. Lay the infernal rascals by the heels, say I. Hall's gang, eh?" he repeated with a smile. "Then I guess we had better keep our pockets buttoned." And with that he waddled into the bar to relieve Edith.

"I shall come round to-night," George whispered to the girl.

"Do, dear," and she was gone.

"Are you going to stay and have some dinner with us, George?" enquired the landlord, poking his ugly face into the room as Vincent was about to leave.

"I am sorry to say I shall have to go back to the camp with a few things for Phil."

"But we shall see you to-night?" This with a knowing smile.

"I shall be round, certainly. But you must not expect me to drink with your friend, Smith."

"Not I—I've done with him. He's a drunken fool. I heard about that business with Edith. I'm glad you treated him as you did, George. Pity you didn't give him a thumping as well. It would have done him no end of good, for he hasn't the manners of a hog." And, as George disap-

peared with a smile, Mr. Logan's face might have been seen to contract, or at least that portion of it about his eyes, and he might at the same time have been heard to mutter, "Hall's gang, eh? It's time we got to work, Sammy, time we got to work, old pal."

END OF VOL. I.

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